

Patriotism without state blessing:
Chinese cyber nationalists in a predicament

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Abstract

Cyber nationalism in China is on the rise, with complex implications for authoritarian rule. On one hand, nationalistic netizens in general demonstrate pro-regime inclinations and side with the state in online debates. On the other hand, popular nationalism often directly contests the state's claims to nationalist legitimacy and runs the risk of collective mobilization. What happens when a nationalistic fever meets with the authoritarian state? This chapter explores the party-state's efforts to rein in cyber nationalism and netizens' reactions by examining the "Diba Expedition"—an online event in which Chinese nationalist netizens flooded the Facebook page of president-elect Tsai Ing-wen in early 2016 to defend the "One China" principle. This patriotic event was full of irony, given that Facebook is banned in China and the party-state made diligent efforts to censor relevant mobilizing threads. Such conflict between spontaneous patriotism and state repression calls into question both the legitimacy of the regime and nature of Chinese nationalism. However, content analysis of posts in the "Diba Expedition" finds that many nationalists seem to have found a way to reconcile authoritarian rule with their love of the nation.

With over 26 million members as of January 2017, Diba is one of the most vibrant virtual communities in China.¹ Since its inception, it has been a hotbed for cyber activism. In January 2016, Diba users were again mobilized. They swarmed Facebook pages of independence-leaning Taiwanese individuals and institutions such as president-elect Tsai Ing-wen, *Apple Daily Taiwan*, and *Sanlih News*, defending the “One China” principle. However, this patriotic event was full of irony as Facebook is banned in China and the state diligently censored relevant mobilizing threads. Such a conflict between popular nationalism and state repression calls into question the nature of cyber nationalism and regime legitimacy in China. What happens when the nationalistic fever meets with authoritarian rule in cyberspace? How do nationalist netizens situate themselves versus the state when the latter suppresses their patriotic action, especially after they are exposed to the outside world?

Through examination of the “Diba Expedition,” this chapter investigates how young Chinese nationalists have reconciled patriotism and authoritarianism in the digital age. It finds that cyber nationalism is not just a variant of angry youth (*fenqing*) activism that is driven by anger and defensive in nature² or a carefully reasoned movement that rests on articulation of China’s standing and national interest in the world.³ Rather, many cyber nationalists have constructed a

¹ Diba was set up in 2004 and named after football player Li Yi. It got the more popular nickname Diba (the Emperor’s Bar) because Chinese netizens believe that Li once claimed that his dribbling was on par with Thierry Henry—the French football player that Chinese fans have fondly nicknamed “Emperor Henry.”

² Lijun Yang and Yongnian Zheng, “Fen Qings (Angry Youth) in Contemporary China,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 21, no. 76 (2012): 637–53.

³ Yongming Zhou, “Informed Nationalism: Military Websites in Chinese Cyberspace,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 14, no. 44 (2005): 543–62; David Kurt Herold, “Rage and Reflection: Chinese Nationalism Online between Emotional Venting and Measured Opinion,” in *New*

self-reinforcing narrative framework that embraces both state indoctrination of national identity and their own living experiences of Internet-mediated interaction with the outside world. Such a framework justifies more aggressive nationalist behavior and glorifies the party-state, thus helps reconcile their love of the nation within the authoritarian regime.

Analysis in this chapter is based on data collected through several different approaches. First, the author conducted in-depth ethnographic work online by observing Diba and the targeted Facebook pages. Second, using the R package (Rfacebook), the author scraped comments on all 29 posts by Tsai between January 15 and 24 and created a dataset with 28068 comments for further analysis.⁴ Third, the author also explored news reports and other social media platforms such as Weibo to supplement and triangulate data obtained through other approaches.

Cyber Nationalism under Authoritarian Rule

Nationalism bears ambivalent ramifications for authoritarian rule. On the one hand, the regime has a nationalist root and is increasingly relying on nationalism as a source of legitimacy.⁵ In fact, it is argued that the communist revolution and its victory in 1949 were just as much a nationalist movement and an achievement of nationalism.⁶ As the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) gradually has departed from communism in the reform era—especially since the 1989

Connectivities in China: Virtual, Actual and Local Interactions, 2012, 23–35.

⁴ It is unclear why Rfacebook failed to get all comments. But it is the best package that the author is aware of. Despite the public availability, all cited comments are anonymized to avoid the risk of users becoming targets of state repression and cyber bullying.

⁵ Bruce Gilley and Heike Holbig, “The Debate on Party Legitimacy in China: A Mixed Quantitative/qualitative Analysis,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 18, no. 59 (2009): 339-58.

⁶ Wenfang Tang, *Populist Authoritarianism: Chinese Political Culture and Regime Sustainability* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 44–45.

student movement, nationalism has helped to rescue the regime from potential democratic reform. This has contributed to the rise of state-led nationalism,⁷ as well as popular nationalist mobilization that has been sponsored or tolerated by the state.⁸ On the other hand, nationalism can be destabilizing, as it not only constrains the state's policy choices in foreign relations,⁹ but also runs the risk of disrupting socio-political stability. Popular nationalism is costly to suppress once it is invoked because doing so can be seen as unpatriotic. Moreover, popular nationalist mobilization may have a dangerous spillover effect—after all, “what the Chinese leaders fear most is a national movement that fuses various discontented groups—such as unemployed workers, farmers, and students—under the same banner of nationalism”¹⁰

The Internet, which empowers citizens to better communicate with each other, engage in public discussion, and mobilize, has challenged authoritarian states and further complicated the interaction between nationalism and authoritarianism. In the Arab Spring, aggrieved citizens successfully scuttled entrenched autocracies with the facilitation of social media applications such as Facebook and Twitter.¹¹ In China, where the state is much stronger, the Internet also

⁷ Suisheng Zhao, “A State-Led Nationalism: The Patriotic Education Campaign in Post-Tiananmen China,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 31, no. 3 (September 1998): 287–302.

⁸ Peter Hays Gries, “Tears of Rage: Chinese Nationalist Reactions to the Belgrade Embassy Bombing,” *The China Journal*, no. 46 (2001): 25–43; James Reilly, *Strong Society, Smart State: The Rise of Public Opinion in China's Japan Policy* (Columbia University Press, 2013); Jessica Chen Weiss, *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China's Foreign Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁹ Reilly, *Strong Society, Smart State*; Suisheng Zhao, “Foreign Policy Implications of Chinese Nationalism Revisited: The Strident Turn,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 22, no. 82 (2013): 35–53; Jessica Chen Weiss, *Powerful Patriots*.

¹⁰ Susan Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 62.

¹¹ Philip N Howard and Muzammil M Hussain, *Democracy's Fourth Wave?: Digital Media and the Arab Spring* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

has empowered the citizenry by enabling a nascent public sphere,¹² promoting civil society,¹³ and facilitating social and dissident mobilization.¹⁴ State control efforts often only intensify online activism as netizens have developed artful and playful “digital hidden transcripts” to evade and fight state censorship.¹⁵ Moreover, by breaking the state’s monopoly over mass media and empowering citizens to challenge official rhetoric, the Internet has led to the erosion of the state’s ideational leadership.¹⁶ As a result, nationalism increasingly has grown out of being state-led and has become more spontaneous,¹⁷ thus contesting the state’s claims to nationalistic legitimacy. For instance, though the state promotes the idea that all fifty-six ethnic groups belong to the unified Chinese nation (*zhonghua minzu*), Han supremacism and other

¹² Johan Lagerkvist, *The Internet in China: Unlocking and Containing the Public Sphere* (Lund: Lund University, 2007); Guobin Yang and Craig Calhoun, “Media, Civil Society, and the Rise of a Green Public Sphere in China,” *China Information* 21, no. 2 (2007): 211–36; Adrian Rauchfleisch and Mike S. Schäfer, “Multiple Public Spheres of Weibo: A Typology of Forms and Potentials of Online Public Spheres in China,” *Information, Communication & Society* 18, no. 2 (February 24, 2015): 139–55.

¹³ Guobin Yang, “The Internet and Civil Society in China: A Preliminary Assessment,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 12, no. 36 (2003): 453–75; Guobin Yang, “The Co-Evolution of the Internet and Civil Society in China,” *Asian Survey* 43, no. 3 (2003): 124–41; Zixue Tai, *The Internet in China: Cyberspace and Civil Society* (London: Routledge, 2006).

¹⁴ Patricia Thornton, “Manufacturing Dissent in Transnational China: Boomerang, Backfire or Spectacle?,” in *Popular Protest in China*, ed. Kevin J. O’Brien (Harvard University Press, 2008), 179–204; Yongnian Zheng, *Technological Empowerment: The Internet, State, and Society in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); Li Gao and James Stanyer, “Hunting Corrupt Officials Online: The Human Flesh Search Engine and the Search for Justice in China,” *Information, Communication, & Society* 17, no. 7 (2014): 814–29. Jun Liu’s chapter in this collection shows how digital media facilitated the evolution in contention repertoire in China.

¹⁵ Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (Columbia University press, 2009); Ashley Esarey and Qiang Xiao, “Political Expression in the Chinese Blogosphere,” *Asian Survey* 48, no. 5 (2008): 752–72; Guobin Yang, “Lightness, Wildness, and Ambivalence: China and New Media Studies,” *New Media & Society* 14, no. 1 (2012): 170–79.

¹⁶ Yanqi Tong and Shaohua Lei, “War of Position and Microblogging in China,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 22, no. 80 (2013): 292–311.

¹⁷ See Xu Wu, *Chinese Cyber Nationalism: Evolution, Characteristics, and Implications* (Lexington Books, 2007); Simon Shen and Shaun Breslin, eds., *Online Chinese Nationalism and China’s Bilateral Relations* (Lexington Books, 2010).

ethno-centric discursive debates are widely observed online,¹⁸ which not only are in conflict with official rhetoric, but more importantly call the party-state to account for the discrepancies between its view and that of the public.¹⁹

But spontaneous cyber nationalism may be advantageous to the party-state in two senses. First, cyber nationalists often express pro-regime discourses that resonate with official narratives of century-long national humiliation and national revival.²⁰ In fact, nationalist netizens often are perceived as implicit allies of the party-state, and are criticized as “patriotic rogues” (*aiguo zei*) or the “fifty-cent army.”²¹ Second, debates over cyber nationalism often intensify discourse competition online, thus help to divert and neutralize criticism towards the regime.²²

¹⁸ James Leibold, “More Than a Category: Han Supremacism on the Chinese Internet,” *The China Quarterly* 203 (2010): 539–59; Wai-Yip Ho, “Islam, China and the Internet: Negotiating Residual Cyberspace between Hegemonic Patriotism and Connectivity to the Ummah,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 30, no. 1 (2010): 63–79.

¹⁹ Clay Shirky, “The Political Power of Social Media: The Political Power of Social Media,” *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 1 (2011): 28–41.

²⁰ Peter Hays Gries, “Narratives to Live By: The Century of Humiliation and Chinese National Identity Today,” in *China’s Transformations: The Stories beyond the Headlines*, ed. Lionel M. Jensen and Timothy B. Weston (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 151–75; William A. Callahan, *China: The Pessimist Nation* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

²¹ See Xiaodong Wang, “Supposed ‘patriotic thieves’ not the real threat to China,” *Global Times*, July 12, 2011, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/665873.shtml>; Rongbin Han, “Manufacturing Consent in Cyberspace: China’s ‘Fifty-Cent Army,’” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 44, no. 2 (2015): 105–34.

²² Rongbin Han, “Defending the Authoritarian Regime Online: China’s ‘Voluntary Fifty-Cents Army,’” *The China Quarterly* 224 (2015): 1006–25; Rongbin Han, “Withering Gongzhi: Cyber Criticism of Chinese Public Intellectuals,” *International Journal of Communication* (forthcoming).

Overall, the state is trapped between a rock and a hard place. Ideally, it could strategically manage cyber-nationalism to amplify its benefits while avoiding its challenges.²³ But due to limited capacity or genuine intent, it in practice often only censors online content regardless of whether it is pro or against the regime.²⁴ Such indiscriminate censorship may have intriguing implications for online popular nationalism—how would nationalists situate themselves versus the state when the latter suppress their patriotic action? Compared to critical citizens that are often against state control, nationalists may have more complex and unpredictable reactions: while state control may alienate them and even transform them into regime critics, their prior pro-regime perceptions and beliefs may function to justify state control, allowing them to reconcile their love of the nation and acceptance of state control.²⁵ The Diba Expedition serves as an ideal opportunity to explore this relatively uncharted water of scholarship.

The Diba Expedition: A Brief Introduction

The Diba Expedition can be traced back to the earlier cross-strait brawl over a 16-year-old girl Chou Tzu-yu. Chou, member of the K-pop group Twice, identified herself as a Taiwanese and

²³ See Peter Lorentzen, “China’s Strategic Censorship,” *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 2 (2014): 402–14.

²⁴ Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, “How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression,” *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 2 (2013): 1–18. The authors argue that the state prioritizes censorship of collective mobilization over general criticism. Other scholars argue that the state takes criticisms seriously as well. See Ashley Esarey and Qiang Xiao, “Understanding State Preferences for Information Control: Central-Local Relations in China’s Quest to Tame the Web” (paper presented at the Association of Asian Studies Annual Conference, Chicago, March 26-29, 2015). Christopher Cairns’ chapter in this collection also suggests that the state may fine tune its control over different types of content related to high-profile online scandals.

²⁵ Lagerkvist, *The Internet in China*; Barbara Geddes and John Zaller, “Sources of Popular Support for Authoritarian Regimes,” *American Journal of Political Science* 33, no. 2 (1989): 319–47.

waved a ROC national flag at a TV show in November 2015, which was then reported on Weibo by Huang An, a China-based Taiwanese singer, as evidence of her being pro-Taiwan independence. According to Huang's post on January 8th, 2016, Chou was depicted as a "pro-independence artist" and "the light of Taiwan" by independence-leaning media such as *Sanlih TV* but did not try to clarify everything. Huang's action generated a huge splash. While Taiwanese politicians, media, and citizens supported Chou almost ubiquitously, many Mainland citizens insisted on the punishment of Chou and her company JYP Entertainment for violating the one-China principle. Subsequently, Chinese TV stations and businesses quickly ceased cooperation with Chou and Twice, echoing the state's call for preventing anyone from "making profits in China while supporting separatist activities."²⁶ Under pressure, JYP issued several explanatory statements but failed to pacify either side: the Mainland considered them insincere, but the Taiwanese took them as surrendering to bullying China.

On January 15, 2016, JYP finally released a video of Chou apologizing for the incident, which many Chinese applauded but only further irritated Taiwanese.²⁷ So when the Chinese actor Lin Gengxin commented "the apology was so sudden that she didn't even have time to memorize the script," he instantly became the target of outraged Taiwanese who flooded his Facebook page.²⁸ It was so tense that even the Taiwanese celebrity Show Luo was attacked by angry

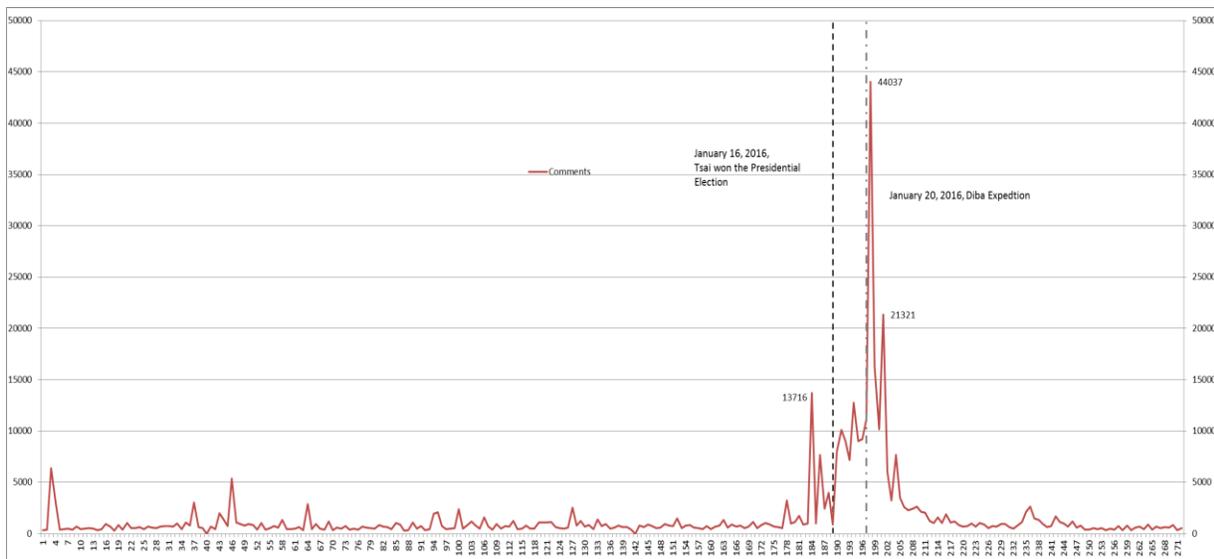
²⁶ State Council Taiwan Affairs Office, "Bu Yunxu Shaoshuren zai Dalu Zhuanqian que Zhichi Taidu" (Will Not Allow the Few Who Make Profits in Mainland but Support Taiwanese Separatism), December 30, 2015, <http://www.chinanews.com/tw/2015/12-30/7694485.shtml>.

²⁷ See Eva Dou, Jenny W. Hsu, and In-Soo Nam, "K-Pop Singer's Apology Strikes a Chord in Taiwan's Election," January 17, 2016, <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2016/01/17/k-pop-singers-apology-strikes-a-chord-in-taiwans-election/>.

²⁸ *Eastday*, "FB Biaoqingbao Dazhan Huang Zitao Kongcheng Zuida Yingjia" (Facebook Graphic

Taiwanese simply because he said that “We’re all Chinese” at a movie premier.²⁹ In response, Chinese netizens also mobilized, starting a “battle of memes” with Taiwanese on Facebook, which accompanied and was intensified by the Taiwanese presidential election and led to the “Diba Expedition” on January 20th, 2016. Hailing the slogan “when Diba marches on into the battlefield, not a blade of grass will be left” (*Diba chuzheng, cuncao busheng*), Chinese netizens bombarded their targets’ Facebook pages with tens and thousands of comments within a matter of hours (See **Figure 1** for an example of the impact).

Figure 1: Comments of Tsai Ing-wen's Facebook Posts (12/01/2015-02/29/2016)



Notes: Compiled by the author.

The debate was clearly one-sided, reflecting the power of Chinese nationalists, who were huge in number, strongly motivated, and well organized. For instance, among the top 100 comments

Meme War Huang Zitao Probably Would Be the Biggest Winner), January 18, 2016, http://photo.eastday.com/2013slideshow/20160118_9/index5.html.

²⁹ BBC, “Taiwan Election: How a Penitent Pop Star May Have Helped Tsai Win,” January 18, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35340530>.

to the most-commented post on Tsai's Facebook page,³⁰ which received 44037 comments in total, only two sided with Taiwan, including one by a Mainland netizen who warned "Taiwanese compatriots" about the coming invasion of "Mainland brainless pupils,"³¹ and the other by a Taiwanese, who pointed out that as an aggression by Chinese, the Chou Tzu-yu incident has led to the victory of Tsai and the Democratic Progressive Party. Sarcastically, the user concluded, "Thank You. Thank You. Thank You. I am truly grateful so I thanked you three times."³²

The Diba Expedition had several noticeable features. It was highly organized. The campaign, which officially began at 7pm on January 20th 2016, had specific targets including Tsai and more than ten other organizations.³³ Participants had a clear division of labor and explicit disciplinary rules.³⁴ Organizers even provided Facebook accounts and GFW-circumventing software.³⁵ However, the event was still essentially a crowd-enabled connective action.³⁶ Its mobilization was exclusively done online through multiple social media platforms. The organization was informal with multiple commanding hubs. Its participants were connected, but their engagement was quite personal, with many joining the campaign purely as individuals, beyond

³⁰ Facebook defines "top comments" as "the most relevant comments"

³¹ Facebook comment on January 20, 2016 at 6:34am.

³² Facebook comment on January 20, 2016 at 4:23am.

³³ Marco Huang, "Chinese Netizens Flood Tsai Ing-Wen's Facebook Page with Anti-Taiwan Independence Posts," January 21, 2016, <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2016/01/21/chinese-netizens-flood-tsai-ing-wens-facebook-page-with-anti-taiwan-independence-posts/>.

³⁴ Pu Shan and Hui Qiu, "'Diba fb Chuzheng' Zuzhizhe: Shua Barong Bachi Gei Taidu Shang Aiguo Ke" (Organizer of 'Diba Facebook Expedition': Teach Taiwanese Separatist a Patriotic Lesson with Eight Honors and Eight Disgraces), January 21, 2016, <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/zg/2016-01-21/doc-ixnuxve8316358.shtml>.

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, "Three Patterns of Power in Technology-Enabled Contention," *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 19, no. 4 (2014): 421–39

any organizers' control. The campaign was also quite joyful for many participants, and in this sense differentiated itself from "angry youth" activism that is often driven by anger. It featured a massive usage of visual memes by both sides to the extent that it was viewed as a "battle of memes."³⁷ The Chinese Communist Party's mouthpiece, *the People's Daily* even called it an "online carnival of the post-90s."³⁸ Indeed, participants in the Diba Expedition were mostly youngsters—a *China Real Time* report claims that over 60 per cent of them were of the post-1990 generation.³⁹ This is in accordance with the author's observation—in November 2016, a managerial recruitment event by Diba attracted a total of 241 applicants; among the 239 which provided age information, only eight were born before 1990, 60% of them were born after 1995, and the average age was 20.6.⁴⁰

Contesting National Identity and Statehood of China in the Diba Expedition

The Diba Expedition reveals the dynamics between cyber nationalism and authoritarianism. As a massive operation outside the Great Firewall (GFW), this event heightens the tension between the party-state and cyber nationalists. With this in mind, this section examines the event from three different angles: the Chinese state's reactions, the Taiwanese perspective, and the nationalist netizens' own narrative.

³⁷ For a collection of the memes used in the Diba Expedition, see <http://www.v4.cc/News-1053222.html>

³⁸ See Yu Xiao, "'Diba Yuanzheng', '90 Hou' de Wangluo Kuanghuan" (The 'Diba Expedition,' The Online Carnival of the 'Post-90s'), January 25, 2016, <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0125/c1003-28080201.html>.

³⁹ Huang, "Chinese Netizens Flood Tsai Ing-Wen's Facebook Page."

⁴⁰ See <http://tieba.baidu.com/p/4877283134>.

State Responses

The Chinese party-state showed mixed reactions to the Diba Expedition. Overtly, it encouraged and praised the campaign. The Chinese Communist Youth League Central Committee (CCYLCC), for instance, posted a series of Weibo entries about the expedition before and after the event.⁴¹ Just ten minutes before the expedition started, its official Weibo account posted a poem by Chairman Mao titled “Long March,” together with the historical painting of the PLA crossing the Yangtse River to conquer then ROC capital Nanjing, and the Chinese Red Army’s disciplinary doctrine, “Three Main Rules of Discipline and Eight Points for Attention.”⁴² The entry was apparently supportive of the expedition, though it cautioned nationalist netizens about how they should behave. *Global Times*, the *People’s Daily* subsidiary known for its nationalist appeal, defended the Diba Expedition against criticism in a commentary on January 21, claiming that “the event’s value basis is patriotism.”⁴³ On January 22, 2016, *the People’s Daily* published a commentary on WeChat titled “We Trust You, the Post-1990s.”⁴⁴ It denounces Taiwan-independence supporters as being incompetent, ignorant, narrow-minded, and arrogant compared to China’s post-90s generation, who “are making confident strides and improvising freely” and whose performance “is full of sunshine and self-confidence” and “brightens

⁴¹ The Chinese Communist Youth League is the youth movement run by the Chinese Communist Party. It is the Party’s major vehicle to connect to, indoctrinate, and guide the youth. For an analysis of the CCYL’s role in the Diba Expedition, see <http://www.dooo.cc/2016/02/40703.shtml>

⁴² See <http://weibo.com/3937348351/De1KAqVeT>.

⁴³ “Bubi Kuazhang ‘Diba Chuzheng’ de Liangan Fu Xiaoguo” (No Need to Exaggerate the Negative Impact of the Diba Expedition on Cross-Strait Relations), January 21, 2016, <http://opinion.huanqiu.com/editorial/2016-01/8425254.html>

⁴⁴ “Renmin Ribao Ping Diba Chuzheng FB: 90 Hou Xiangxin Nimen” (People’s Daily Commentary on the Diba Facebook Expedition: We Trust You, Post-90s Generation), January 22, 2016, http://tech.163.com/16/0122/09/BDU4UF9I000915BF_all.html.

people’s eyes.” It hails that “as long as we are confident enough and make great strides forward, we will surely step down Taiwan-separatist forces at the foot of history!”

Both the CCYLCC and *the People’s Daily* neglected an inconvenient but apparent fact: to conduct such a patriotic act, nationalist netizens have to first overcome the barriers erected by the party-state: besides the GFW that prevents netizens from directly accessing Facebook, the authorities also diligently deleted mobilizing posts from Diba and other online platforms and shut down live streaming of the event on online video platforms.⁴⁵ A leaked official censorship directive betrays the state’s concerns:

The Diba Expedition has become complicated. Local media shall moderate coverage of the event. Do not recommend the topic. Pay attention to removing negative comments that use this event to attack our system and cross-strait relations. Also watch for and stop the dissemination of harmful information such as ‘wall-climbing’ techniques.⁴⁶

Evidently, though it openly endorsed the Diba Expedition,⁴⁷ the state made serious covert efforts to watch, manage, and control the event. This may be reflecting a split within the regime and institutional politics. But it was also possible that the state wished to reap the benefits of popular nationalism without risking it going out of control. The state’s involvement conditions the contestation of national identity and statehood in the campaign as Taiwanese and

⁴⁵ Hongchao Sun, “Diba Chuzheng FB: Zhibo Pingtai Bei Fengjin Duoge Wangzhan Guan Pinglun” (The Diba Facebook Expedition: Live Streaming Platforms Banned and Multiple Websites Shut Down Commentary Sections), January 21, 2016, <http://tech.qq.com/a/20160121/011570.htm>.

⁴⁶ See <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/2016/01/> 【真理部】-帝吧出征事件/

⁴⁷ One of the organizers of the Diba Expedition was invited to the 2016 CCYLCC Commendatory Meeting on May 4th, 2016. See “Liang Daozhang, Jin Dong, Zhao Ritian Deng Chuxi Tuanzhongyang Biaozhanghui” (Taoist Master Liang, Jin Dong, Zhao Ritian and Others Attended CCYL Central Committee Commendatory Meeting), May 5, 2016, http://news.ifeng.com/a/20160505/48695621_0.shtml.

dissenting netizens often question the spontaneity of the mobilization, as will be discussed below.

The Taiwanese Perspective

Even though their voices were buried in the flood of nationalist comments, most Taiwanese engaging in the cyber brawl disagreed with Chinese nationalists. Noticeably, they took advantage of the predicament that Chinese nationalist netizens were in: (1) association with the state made them look like state agents; and (2) though they seemingly had the state's endorsement, their patriotic action actually was not blessed by the state—they had to scale the GFW to comment on Facebook in the first place. Taiwanese and dissenting netizens often accused nationalists of being part of the “fifty-cent army” (*wumao dang*, state-sponsored trolls acting under the disguise of ordinary citizens), and thus having no credibility at all. As one Taiwanese put it, “the CCP has released a large troop of ‘fifty-cent army’ slaves to attack Taiwan,” and that only made Taiwanese “more united, more anti-communist, and more pro-independence....”⁴⁸ A Mainlander also saw the expedition more likely a result of the state's conscious manipulation, arguing that the party-state had shown increasing interest in the world outside the GFW in recent years and deployed “fifty-cent army” squads on Twitter and Facebook; this netizen stated that the Diba Expedition was just an “exercise of larger scale.”⁴⁹

The accused association with the state not only deprived nationalist netizens of their credibility, but also transformed the debate over Taiwan-independence from a national identity issue into

⁴⁸ Facebook comment on January 24, 2016 at 1:46.

⁴⁹ Facebook comment on January 22, 2016 at 7:39.

one about different socio-political systems, particularly Taiwan's superiority over the Mainland as a more democratic, freer and more civilized society. The frame was powerful because it also reminded nationalist netizens about the constraints placed on them by the authoritarian regime, even if they might consider themselves patriotic. The irony was vividly conveyed in this comment, "Attacking the free world using the least free method of wall-climbing, rare! I support President Tsai."⁵⁰ A Taiwanese user commented, "Poor Mainlanders, you don't even have the right to vote! You are not even aware that the entire world dislikes you..."⁵¹ Another Taiwanese asserted that "poor Mainlanders always have only one choice and will vanish if they do not go with it" while Taiwanese "enjoy free life that Mainlanders can never have."⁵² The user urged Mainlanders to wake up and struggle for better choices.

The Nationalist Narrative

How did nationalist netizens argue against Taiwanese and the dissenting netizens and achieve inner peace? Intuitively, the most straightforward option would be rejecting the accusation of being state agents. However, this strategy appeared futile. First, mainland netizens could hardly convince their opponents about their true identity; indeed, it would be dangerous to reveal one's identity in online debates. Second, they could not deny the existence of the "fifty-cent army." Further, engaging in such a debate only would get them into more disadvantaged position. Thus, instead of arguing about their identity, nationalists developed a narrative to

⁵⁰ Facebook comment on January 23, 2016 at 11:25.

⁵¹ Facebook comment on January 24, 2016 at 6:53.

⁵² Facebook comment on January 16, 2016 at 1:40.

offset their critics and justify their action. This narrative built on the unquestionable presumption of unification, flaws in Taiwanese democracy, and assertions of personal civility.

Indeed, the entire Diba Expedition centered on Chinese sovereignty and whether Taiwan is part of China. Nationalist netizens repeatedly cited state rhetoric on national identity and unification in their comments. Out of the top 100 comments on the most-commented post by Tsai, 39 reiterated the “Eight Honors and Eight Disgraces” (*Barong bachi*) by former President Hu Jintao and 16 quoted the poem “Homesickness” (*Xiangchou*). This is not an accidental observation. Out of the total 28,068 comments scraped from Tsai’s Facebook page, the above two passages appeared 5,272 and 1,046 times, respectively. Other frequent comments include the lyrics of *Ode to Motherland* (566 times) and declarations that Taiwan has been part of China since ancient times (520 times).

The repetition partially can be attributed to the fact that the campaign was organized and coordinated--according to one organizer, the shift from using graphic memes to “Eight Honors and Eight Disgraces” was purposeful because the text conveys a more coherent and unified message to Taiwanese.⁵³ But why those passages were chosen reflects the legacies of state education and propaganda. These passages are probably the best known among Chinese that convey clear nationalist meanings that fit well in the situation. President Hu’s slogan starts with “Honor to those who love the motherland and shame on those who harm the motherland.” “Homesickness,” by the Taiwanese writer and poet Yu Guangzhong, vividly depicts the close

⁵³ Shan and Qiu, “Diba fb Chuzheng’ Zuzhizhe.”

ties across the Taiwan Strait and is in the 9th grade textbook of Chinese Literature. *Ode to Motherland* is purely nationalist, and was sung at the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics. The verbatim repetition of these suggests that the party-state has set the agenda for nationalist citizens and fed them a set of discourses in the Diba Expedition.⁵⁴

Besides the unquestionable assertion of national unity, Chinese nationalist netizens in the debate also dismissed Taiwanese democracy for being of low quality. Instead of envying Taiwanese for their rights and liberties, they found flaws with Taiwan's political system, seeing it as a malfunctioning one that has caused many social ills. The following entry, which appeared multiple times, summarizes this critique in a highly sarcastic tone,

The religion of democracy is good, with everybody brainwashed. You can generate electricity using love and the votes can fill your stomach.⁵⁵ The Legislative Yuan was occupied but the air-conditioning was no good.⁵⁶ Democracy brings benefits and breast-rubbing cannot be spared.⁵⁷ Pay a hundred thousand, you can f—k Queen of the Sunflower Movement.⁵⁸ Comfort women were voluntary, the granny was happy to be a

⁵⁴ Citing state rhetoric may be a strategy to avoid suppression. But this consideration should be secondary because (1) Facebook is beyond direct state censorship; (2) graphic memes used at the early stage of the Diba Expedition were not offensive to the state, either.

⁵⁵ Generating electricity with love is a slogan hailed in Taiwan's anti-nuclear movement. See Minlong Hong, "314 Fanhe Youxing 'Yaorang Hedian Jiahe Xigui'" (March 14th Anti-Nuclear Demonstration 'Let Nuclear Power Die'), March 6, 2015, <http://www.appledaily.com.tw/realtimenews/article/new/20150306/569178/>.

⁵⁶ Students occupying the Legislative Yuan in 2014 complained about the hot weather and demanded air conditioning. See Xiaotian Tang, "Kangyi Xuesheng Menhuai le, Paizhuo Han 'Kai Kongtiao'" (Protesting Students Felt Extremely Muggy, Pounded the Table Demanding Air Conditioning), March 19, 2014, <http://www.chinatimes.com/cn/realtimenews/20140319002734-260407>.

⁵⁷ The Sunflower Movement leader, Chen Wei-ting, was caught committing sexual harassment. See Yangling Xu, "Taiyanghua Zhanshen Chen Wei-ting Shi Selang" (Sunflower Movement Warrior Chen Wei-ting Is A Sex Offender), December 24, 2014, <http://www.chinatimes.com/cn/newspapers/20141224000825-260102>.

⁵⁸ Johanne Liou, popularly known as Queen of the Sunflower Movement, was found selling sex. See *SETN*, "Taiyanghua Nwang Liu Qiaoan Ren Maiying" (Sunflower Movement Queen Johanne

prostitute.⁵⁹ Elections are huge, everything else is not. Among the few rotten apples, which one can you choose? Democracy brings sugar daddies; the U.S. and Japan are here to dictate. As a running dog, the bones still have to be self-provided. Taiwan is a treasure island, but Taiwanese are the best well frogs across the world!⁶⁰

Nationalist netizens also accused Tsai and other targets for censoring their comments or disabling the graphic comment function, using that as evidence that they were not living up to the democratic principles they advocated. One nationalist netizen sarcastically requested Tsai not to delete comments because she has been advocating for freedom of expression, deriding her by saying, “You should not slap your own face, but it seems that you have, as Tianya visitors caught you deleting comments last time.” The netizen also asked Tsai to enable graphic comments because “many natural born pre-unification youngsters are coming with their meme graphs.”⁶¹ The fact that *Sanlih News* deleted all its posts from January 1, 2016 onwards and Tsai disabled graphic comments due to the storming meme comments validated their belief that Taiwan has embraced democracy only insincerely.

The depiction of Taiwan as a malfunctioning or even fake democracy was derived from multiple sources, including state propaganda. But it also largely resulted from the Internet-enabled cross-Strait communication. For instance, nationalist netizens mentioned a series of specific socio-political events that they saw as blemishes or scandals in Taiwan’s democracy, including

Liou Admitted Selling Sex), May 13, 2016, <http://www.setn.com/News.aspx?NewsID=146339>.

⁵⁹ In the textbook controversy, some student protests argue that the comfort women (sex slaves) during World War II should not be described as being “forced.” See SETN, “Kegang Jingshuo Weianfu shi Ziyuan de!” (Course Guideline Says Comfort Women Was Voluntary!), August 5, 2015, <http://www.setn.com/News.aspx?NewsID=88435>.

⁶⁰ Facebook comment on January 20, 2016 at 4:22.

⁶¹ Facebook comment on January 18, 2016 at 13:01.

anti-nuclear power protests, the Sunflower movement, and the textbook revision controversy over the comfort women issue. They have learned about these issues precisely because the Internet has allowed Mainland netizens to access information on these issues and Taiwanese media coverage of them,⁶² which then helped develop the stereotype of Taiwanese democracy being chaotic, inefficient, and hindering development.

Nationalists also contested civility in the virtual debate. Unlike Taiwanese proud of their democratic system, Chinese nationalists boasted about their personal civility—being nice, hospitable, and kind to Taiwanese compatriots—and criticized Taiwanese for lacking such qualities. For instance, many nationalist netizens posted non-confrontational comments such as recipes of local dishes and scenic pictures, or invited Taiwanese to visit their hometown. This might be a result of organization and coordination, as expedition organizers instructed nationalist netizens to be civil and moderate. But the sense of moral superiority also developed as a learned experience in the Diba Expedition, as nationalist netizens experienced Taiwanese as being impolite, narrow-minded, and demeaning. As one Mainland user commented, “I respect you and your understanding of the Taiwanese political system. We only have national affinity because of our education... We treat you as compatriots. Why you treat us like enemies or even disrespectfully as pigs and dogs?”⁶³ A repeated comment argues that Mainland netizens had avoided using disastrous events such as the Taiwan Earthquake and the dust explosion

⁶² For instance, the popular forum Tianya.cn, which boasts over 125 million registered users as of February 2017, has a special board on Taiwan. Searching keywords “generating electricity with love,” “comfort women,” and “Joanne Liou” on this board returns 578, 2,449, and 440 results, respectively. Searching these terms (“comfort women” is searched together with “Taiwan”) on the entire forum via Google returns 9,070, 18,900, and 5,590 results, respectively.

⁶³ Facebook comment on January 16, 2016 at 5:30pm.

accident to attack Taiwanese, while Taiwanese frequently brought up disasters such as Nanjing Massacre to curse the Mainland. The entry concluded that “their self-perceived civility is far below that of the Mainland.”⁶⁴ Another comment provided a more detailed comparison (and accusation) in a much more antagonist tone,

Summarizing the battling situation of Mainland vs. Taiwan
Culture and history vs. swearing and abuses
Ridicule facial meme packages vs. vulgar low-moral photoshopped pictures
Rational discussion vs. your mother’s shit
Friendship and family ties vs. Mainlanders go die
Friendship and family ties vs. celebrating the Tianjin Explosion
Friendship and family ties vs. celebrating the Tangshan Earthquake
Friendship and family ties vs. celebrating the Wenchuan Earthquake
Comment: Mainlanders win! I will teach people from Taiwan Province an English word, insular, which means ‘island, narrow-minded, closed, and tunnel-visioning.’⁶⁵

Such a sense of moral superiority and the discursive practice that denounces Taiwanese as less civilized may be the “surface” appeal of the “deep structure” that nationalist netizens have in their mind and their lived experience of Internet-mediated interaction with the outside world.⁶⁶

Reconciling Patriotism and Authoritarianism

Previous studies have suggested a few possible explanations for Chinese citizens’ deference to or acceptance of authoritarian rule: they may support the regime because of its performance; they may agree with the state about stability maintenance; they may disagree but refrain from

⁶⁴ Facebook comment on January 20, 2016 at 6:09am.

⁶⁵ Facebook comment on January 22, 2016 at 17:22.

⁶⁶ The concepts are borrowed from Noam Chomsky’s discussion on linguistic structure, with the “deep structure” containing all information relevant to semantic interpretation and the “surface structure” all information relevant to phonetic interpretation. See Noam Chomsky, *Language and Mind* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 111.

taking action; or they may be holding private truths but telling public lies.⁶⁷ These explanations may account for the passive support the regime enjoys but are not sufficient to explain why participants in the Diba Expedition identified with the regime so strongly and showed so much active support for it.

As previous studies suggest, citizens may rally around the state because they lack alternative frames on specific issues,⁶⁸ or their frames have led them to support the regime.⁶⁹ Overall, it appears that nationalist netizens in the Diba Expedition have built a narrative frame that helped to reconcile their stance with the authoritarian regime. This frame takes national identity for granted, contests Taiwan's democracy, and depicts Taiwanese as less civilized than Mainlanders. Their narrative is as follows: Yes, Taiwanese may have democracy. But the social ills and political dramas in Taiwan show that the democratic system is either fake or malfunctioning. We have an authoritarian system. But with it, we have achieved significant progress. The fact that Taiwanese and the outside world criticize our political system (which is superficial) without recognizing our progress (which is concrete) betrays their hypocrisy and narrow-mindedness. Moreover, we are more civilized as individuals, meaning we are morally superior. In reality, our system may be better.

The resonance between state and netizen rhetoric in this case was striking, showing the impact of state indoctrination through its nationalistic education and propaganda efforts. Through the

⁶⁷ Johan Lagerkvist, *After the Internet, Before Democracy: Competing Norms in Chinese Media and Society* (Peter Lang, 2010), 147–148.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁶⁹ Zhou, "Informed Nationalism"; Han, "Defending the Authoritarian Regime Online."

long-term “patriotic education,” the state repeatedly exposes Chinese citizens to the following message: China's one-party system is superior and other countries' democratic systems are, at best, misleading and fake, and at worst, lead to chaos.⁷⁰ Such a state-citizenry linkage, in addition to the state's endorsement of the Expedition, goes against the often taken-for-granted disposition that treats political activism as a form of non-institutional politics that is opposite to and different from institutional politics. Clearly, the Diba Expedition shows political activism is entangled with and appropriating institutional politics. In this regard, the analysis here confirms Jack Goldstone's point on the “fuzzy and permeable boundary between institutionalized and noninstitutionalized politics.”⁷¹

But the story here is not just that the Chinese party-state has captured younger generations. More importantly, it shows that exposure to the outside world has not neutralized state propaganda, but rather has reinforced nationalism among China's young netizens.⁷² Their beliefs were partially built on state propaganda, but also on their own lived experience of Internet-mediated interaction outside the GFW. As one organizer explained, “People who frequent Facebook know that Taiwanese have always had strong prejudice against the Mainland... Hopefully this event will help correct their biases towards the Mainland.” This

⁷⁰ Zhao, “A State-Led Nationalism;” Zeng Wang, “National Humiliation, History Education, and the Politics of Historical Memory: Patriotic Education Campaign in China,” *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (2008): 783–806.

⁷¹ Jack A Goldstone, “Introduction: Bridging Institutionalized and Noninstitutionalized Politics,” in *States, Parties, and Social Movements*, ed. Jack A. Goldstone (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 2.

⁷² Chinese citizens' perceptions of foreign conditions are negatively correlated to their evaluations of China and the government. See Haifeng Huang, “International Knowledge and Domestic Evaluations in a Changing Society: The Case of China,” *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 3 (2015): 613–34.

explains why the BBC also was a target of the Expedition. Moreover, being regarded as state agents only reinforced nationalist netizens' perception of being unfairly treated and misunderstood. This finding echoes other studies on overseas Chinese students. A 2016 survey study by Purdue University further reveals that experiences in the U.S. have resulted in a more positive attitude toward China among Chinese students.⁷³ This may be because they have learned about more flaws in U.S. politics and society and so view their own society relatively more positively than before. It may also be that cross-national interactions have exposed Chinese students to foreigners who they believe often exhibit misinformed, prejudiced and offensive views of Chinese current events.⁷⁴

Conclusion

As Zengzhi Shi and Guobin Yang argue, the Internet enables multiple forms of empowerment, including individual empowerment to take action and produce social change.⁷⁵ Cyber nationalism is clearly a form of individual empowerment for many citizens, allowing them to act on behalf of a grand goal. In the Diba Expedition, nationalist netizens passionately defended China against external challenges despite state constraints and accusations by other that they were state agents. They did so by constructing a narrative frame that takes national identity for granted, contests Taiwan's democracy, and depicts Taiwanese as less civilized than Mainlanders.

⁷³ "Purdue Survey of Chinese Students in the United States: A General Report," Center on religion and Chinese society, Purdue University, November 15, 2016, <https://www.purdue.edu/crcs/publications/crcs-reports/>.

⁷⁴ Henry Chiui Hail, "Patriotism Abroad: Overseas Chinese Students' Encounters With Criticisms of China," *Journal of Studies in International Education* 19, no. 4 (January 12, 2015): 311–26.

⁷⁵ Zengzhi Shi and Guobin Yang, "New Media Empowerment and State-Society Relations in China," in *The Internet, Social Media, and a Changing China*, ed. Jacques DeLisle, Avery Goldstein, and Guobin Yang (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 71–85.

While it is built partially on nationalist priors, misconceptions, and alternate facts, this frame indirectly justified and glorified authoritarian rule, helping nationalist netizens to reconcile their love of the nation and acceptance of authoritarian rule.

Nationalist netizens' acquiescence to authoritarian rule seems to be a blessing for the party-state. But that does not mean that popular nationalism is risk free. In the Diba Expedition and other cyber nationalist events, more extreme, violent, and deviant voices have by no means been rare. For instance, many nationalists have 'encouraged' Taiwan independence, hoping that the CCP will then have no option but to reunify the nation with force. Their impatience and dissatisfaction also are reflected in sayings such as "Re-take the Island, eliminate the people on it" (*liudao bu liuren*) and the nickname they gave to State Council Taiwan Affairs Office, "State Council Kneeling before Taiwanese Office." This trend is not just incongruent with the state's "peaceful unification" rhetoric, but more importantly shows the state's incapability to control nationalists' sentiment, which may pressure it to adopt policies that it does not favor.

Mobilizations such as the Diba Expedition also expose nationalist netizens to different ideas. For instance, pro-liberal activists took the opportunity to engage and transform participants in the event, and repeatedly posted an entry with links to dissident websites. As one dissenting user states, "I believe it is a good thing for those 'little pinkos'⁷⁶ answering to the state's command to

⁷⁶ The term "little pinkos" often refers to pro-regime nationalists. See *The Economist*, "Youthful Nationalists: The East is Pink," August 13, 2016, <http://www.economist.com/news/china/21704853-online-mobs-get-rowdier-they-also-get-label-east-pink>. Also see Maria Repnikova and Kecheng Fang, "Demystifying "Little Pink": The Creation and Evolution of a Gendered Label for Nationalistic Activists in China," *New Media &*

be exposed to the free world. Freedom vs. no freedom, censorship vs. no censorship, and post-deletion vs. no deletion, the good and the bad are so apparent. They will know from inside in two or three days...”⁷⁷

Though nationalism may be declining in China,⁷⁸ the Internet helps aggregate and mobilize nationalists more effectively, thus amplifying their mobilization efforts. In this regard, the Diba Expedition is part of a bigger trend. Indeed, not long after the event, another huge online brawl happened in April 2016 when the two sides disputed the handling of Taiwanese telecom fraud suspects. In this case, a similar narrative appeared with Taiwan being denigrated as “Fraud Island.” Mocking the saying that “The most beautiful scene of Taiwan is the Taiwanese people,” netizens derisively stated that “the most beautiful scene of Taiwan is the Taiwanese Cheating People.”⁷⁹ Further, the Diba Expedition was not just about Taiwan; rather, it reflects ongoing nationalist movement on numerous other issues, such as Sino-Japanese animosity; controversies over Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet; and foreign media coverage on China.⁸⁰ In January 2017, nationalist netizens launched another expedition against the Japanese hotel chain APA because its owner denied the Nanjing Massacre.⁸¹ Besides their domestic

Society (forthcoming).

⁷⁷ Facebook comment on January 20, 2016 at 8:54am.

⁷⁸ Alastair Iain Johnston, “Is Chinese Nationalism Rising? Evidence from Beijing,” *International Security* 41, no. 3 (2017): 7–43.

⁷⁹ EToday, “Zuimei de Fengjing shi Pianren? Lu Wangyou Bian ‘10 ge Wanwan 9 ge Pian’ Feng Tai” (The Most Beautiful Scene Is Fraud? Mainland Netizens Composed “Nine out Ten Taiwanese Are Con Artists” Doggerel to Mock Taiwan), April 18, 2016, <http://www.ettoday.net/news/20160418/682690.htm>

⁸⁰ See *The Economist*, “Youthful Nationalists.”

⁸¹ Kexin Zhao, “Diba Miaozhun APA Jiudian Zaici Chuzheng Taiwan Wangyou ye Jiji Canyu” (Diba Launched another Expedition Targeting APA Hotel, Taiwanese Netizens Also Actively

implications, these cases show that Chinese cyber nationalism has extended despite the GFW. As one participant joked in the Diba Expedition, “Taiwanese deride us for being constrained by the GFW... given the size of our population, were we free to use Facebook, Tsai’s post would be full of our graphic memes...”⁸² In fact, Chinese netizens are now active on all major social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter, as well as commentary sections of international news outlets. They have brought with them their unique perspectives towards China, the world, and the relationship between the two. Their participation has fundamentally altered and will continue to transform the landscape of online debates on China across the globe, though the impact still warrants further exploration.

Participated), January 22, 2017, http://news.ifeng.com/a/20170122/50614872_0.shtml.

⁸² Facebook comment on January 18, 2016 at 4:11.

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