

Cyber Nationalism or Cyber Conservatism?  
The Incident of “Fu Yue and Golden Horse Film Awards”<sup>1</sup>  
(Draft only, Please do not quote)

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In the mid and early 2000s, when Chinese online nationalism began to attract scholarly attention, it was widely viewed as a sign of the nascent civil society, a sphere relatively independent from the communist regime. Although most scholars did not rule out the possibility that the Chinese government manipulates it to put pressure on foreign countries and legitimises its authoritarian rule, they attempted to evaluate to what extent this new type of nationalism deviates from the official ideology or even challenges the state (Gries 2005). For example, Shih-diing Liu, in his studies of the anti-Japan campaign and the forums on the issues related to Taiwan, argues that Chinese nationalist agitations represent “a public demand for discursive right” to claim a political vision that does not necessarily endorse official nationalism (Liu 2006: 149; Liu 2008). He reminds us of the necessity of recognising the “democratic potentials” of Chinese cyber nationalism rather than attributing it to irrational and parochial xenophobia. Last year, at the ACS Crossroads in Cultural Studies conference in Shanghai, in his keynote speech, Liu still insisted on his view by seeing the “Little Pink”, a more recent and new type of patriotic youngsters raging on the Chinese-speaking cyber spaces, as an agent of “popular sovereignty”.

The studies mentioned above largely place Chinese cyber nationalism on the political axis of “state versus society”. This presumption informs a lot of research on the Internet and the grassroots society, especially the developing and non-democratic countries. Exploring the conceptual and institutional structures that do mediate state and society (Spitulnik 2002: 178), Spitulnik discuss the small and alternative media as sites for political deliberation and mobilisation. in Africa discussion of what she calls ‘small media’ in Africa (Spitulnik 2002: 179). Parham (2004: 208) notes the civic learning made possible and available for dissidents. Bernal’s research on the Eritrean case points out the alternative citizenship, nationhood, and dialogues built up by diasporic groups via their cyberspaces (Bernal 2006). All point toward some possibilities and space alternative to the state power.

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In China, despite more findings about the anti-regime sentiment in nationalist discourse, there is a paradigmatic shift in the research on Chinese cyber nationalism. There are two dimensions noteworthy and relevant to my research.

The first new dimension brought by the recent research is the object relation shaping nationalism. Nationalist opinions and emotions usually target some particular “rivals” and get intense in some incidents. Among all, Sino-Japanese relations prove to be the most provocative, making an interesting contrast to the much more ambiguous attitudes towards the US (Zhang, Liu, and Wen 2018: 772-773). Put it simply, the former is much more about national humiliation in the past while the latter involves the pursuit of national strength in the future. Apart from them, the issues about the Taiwan Strait are also provocative. The agitations on the Internet are usually centered around incidents and take place abruptly. The term “nationalism” is not adequate to characterize the people who join the agitations on the Internet. They, rather than having a clear and identifiable set of political belief, casually follow particular images, invoke historical memories or nationalist cliches, and target a handful of figures. These elements constitute the metaphors, semantic relations, and imaginary order by which they live, rather than figuring in articulated arguments, belief system, or well-formulated discourse.

This dimension leads us to the second one. The political nature of Chinese cyber nationalism has increasingly become less about a phenomenon of civil society. While online censorship and political controls have hardened under Xi Jinping, less anti-regime voices and political deliberations are heard in the Internet, not to mention in the incidents of nationalist mobilization. Although there are more types and styles of cyber nationalism emerging on the Chinese Internet, the on-street politics completely disappear. The jingoistic aggression figures in quick comments, sometimes mixed with verbal abuses, on the Internet much more than deliberative texts. This trend is similar to the case of the right-wing internet nationalism in Japan and other countries (Sakamoto 2011: 3). The strong voices and sentiments raging on the Internet make one question if they are representative of the “civil society”. The new breed of nationalism is defined less by the proponents’ stances and views than the Internet memes, graphics, and semantic styles used by them. Vaguely identifying themselves with the nation of China, they are more representative of a set of affective practices embodied in their everyday life than their political viewpoints or allegiances. These practices, neither discursive formation nor neat emotion categories, are shifting, flexible and often over-determined figurations (Wetherwell 2012: p. 4) The politics of Chinese cyber nationalism, though not necessarily to be understood simply as either pro-government or anti-government, are entangled with the Chinese state’s identity project and geopolitical interests.

## The case of Fu Yue

In November 2018, the Taiwanese director, Fu Yue, expressed her wish that “our country to be seen as a truly independent entity” when she received the Award for Best Documentary at the Golden Horse Film Awards ceremony. Following her political remarks, Chinese film director Zhang Yimou and award-winning actor Tu Men referred to “Taiwan” as “Taiwan, China” in their speeches on stage during the ceremony. Fu’s remarks aroused a number of Chinese stars’ protests by reasserting their Chinese national identity on social media. The controversy further blew up online in Chinese societies.

In response, many mainland Chinese posted the image of a map of China that included Taiwan and the “nine-dash line” with the hashtag “China, not even a dot can be missing” (Gan and Chung 2018). The image dates back to the protest against an international tribunal ruling against China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea in 2016. It was first posted by the Communist Youth League. Fu’s further remarks on her Facebook status drew tens of thousands of comments from Chinese netizens to criticize, insult, and even intimidate her. The users from both sides argued bitterly. As a result, Fu received over 49,000 and 89,000 comments respectively in her two posts.

The similar phenomena, often happening over the past ten years, are usually regarded as Chinese cyber-nationalism and youth engagement. What interests me most is not their nationalist and racist slurs against Taiwanese independence, but their affection for the entertainment events like the Golden Horse Film Awards, Ang Lee, and other celebrities. It is an aspect overlooked by most scholars and critics on Chinese cyber nationalism. I extracted the comments from two of Fu’s Facebook posts on November 18, 2018 by focusing on how the Chinese nationalist remarks and slurs are articulated with mainland Chinese netizens’ feelings about China, Taiwan, and the entertainment industry. For the limit of time, I skip the part of the pro-Taiwanese independence comments. I will focus on the comments from the side of mainland China.

“One rotten apple spoils the barrel”

It is very clear that abusive remarks and exchanges prevail over rational discussions. The abusive usage of the term “dog” is very frequent. It was used for over 1,000 times. Many called Fu “dog”, explicitly or implicitly referring to “Japanese or American running dog”. In response, many self-identified Taiwanese accused those who attacked Fu of working as *wumao*, literally meant “fifty cents” in Chinese and a shorthand for Internet

users on the Chinese government's payroll. The frequency is as high as over 5,000 times. Some commenters from mainland China used the memes or *biaoqingbao* originating from the “Little Pink” who accused Chou Tzu-yu, a Taiwanese teen popular star, and Zhou Wei, a mainland actress and director of supporting Taiwanese independence in 2016. Like most nationalist agitations, the attacks target at Fu Yue’s ethnic origin. Fu, born to a Malaysian Chinese father and a Indonesian Chinese mother, was singled out an “outsider” of the big “Chinese” family. In some comments, she was even called “bastard” or “Malay chicken” for her diasporic family background.

Apart from these slurs, there are some non- or less abusive terms noteworthy. For example, *laoshushi* (literally meant “mouse droppings”) was used in the proverb of “One piece of mouse dropping spoils the whole pot of congee,” equivalent to “One rotten apple spoils the barrel” in English. This proverb, appearing for 42 times, provides an insight into the affective structure of the anger over Fu. Many found her words at odd with their desired image of the Gold Horse Award ceremony, an iconic event of the Chinese speaking entertainment industry. While most users made their comments very brief rather than crafting grand narratives, one of them explain the reasoning behind the rage in more details:

“Avoiding the topics about independence and unification, all kinds of exchange are possible. Are these two terms and their content necessary for exchanges? No. ... .. In your work, you can express your political views because it is yours. I believe the majority would not complain about it. ... .. But the Golden Horse Award ceremony is not your work. It belongs to Ang Lee and his whole team. It belongs to every filmmaker and crew member. You definitely know that the expression of your political view would ruin this work. Why do you insist on doing so?”

只要不谈独立，统一，这些敏感词，我们是可以互相交流的。那么现在问题来了，这两个词和所承载的内容，对于交流真的很必要吗？我觉得是完全没必要。……你在你的作品里，可以表达，因为那是你的作品。而且你表达了，我觉得大部分人也都不会有意见。……可是金马奖颁奖典礼不是你的作品，他是李安的作品，是背后团队的作品，是每一个到场的电影工作者，每一个工作人员的作品。所以你为什么可以在知道表达你的政治立场会搞坏这件作品的前提下还要这么做？

What concerns many users is less the integrity of China’s territories than the show business across the Taiwan Strait. In many angry mainland Chinese people’s eyes, Fu’s words did harm to Ang Lee , the Golden Horse Awards and the “normal” exchanges across the Strait. Her improper words and gestures also turned the event into an embarrassing situation in which Chinese stars had to show their national loyalty on the

stage and skipped the after-ceremony banquet. Therefore the verbal abuses against Fu worked as defending the normalcy of the showbiz. Their online engagement is an ongoing struggle against the “enemies” for managing and pursuing multiple but elusive promises of pleasure in popular culture. Dubbed the “Chinese Oscars,” the awards offer a harmonious stage to bring together artists from both sides to celebrate the film industry. In over 40 comments, the users even called the ceremony the “art palace” (*yishu diantang*). Their affection for the Golden Horse Awards is closely entangled with their national imagination. It explains why hundreds of users felt “sorry” (*xinteng*) for Ang Lee.

On the one hand, these web users identify with the nation endorsed by the Chinese Communist regime. It is the official state ideology. On the other hand, they imagine another nation that they moaned for its decline or collapse. It is not a community defined by a territory, common myths or memories. Instead it is a mass culture or a vague sense of cultural proximity. It has risen to prominence along with the capitalist development across the Strait, such as the exponential growth of Chinese film industry and market, i.e. *dapian*, and the popularity of other Putonghua/Mandarin speaking media products.

All these might not constitute a propaganda machine. But they establish a social field of longing for “China” in a cultural sense (Rofel 2007: 45), implying a national consciousness that entails “unified fields of exchange and communication” and an awareness of simultaneity with which people live in their particular language field (Anderson 1991: 44). However, it forecloses the possibility of revealing the voices of national minorities in public. Many mainland netizens reject these incompatible elements as if they have never occurred to the showbiz, “art palace” and even “normal” conversation. Likewise, they obscure the existence of the authoritarian state that implicitly threatens the mainland celebrities to demonstrate their full support to the “One China” principle.

Henceforth, the case of Fu Yue is not simply another case of online harassment. Attributing verbal aggression against her to the existence of “Chinese nationalism”, misogyny, and the convenience of ICTs encourages a distraction from the hatred and love entrenched in contemporary Chinese media culture. The cultural complexity of Chinese cyber nationalism needs to be teased out. Fu’s highly public fashioning of her Taiwanese identity represents a form of popular nationalism, ironically at odds with the pan-Chinese imagination of popular culture. While Fu’s speech is not a political statement in a strict sense, there is a predominant theme: what Taiwanese people need

is an identity to be seen. But the pan-Chinese popular culture is only possible by inhibiting Taiwanese (and Hong Kong perhaps) identity claims from public display or view.

Consumers, as John Fiske (2010: 17) notes, do negotiate meanings offered by the producers of mass culture to affect changes in their own lives and the larger system as well. But they also make their meanings “under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past” (Marx 1852). The Chinese netizens enlist the pleasures of popular culture in the service of the national imagination, harnessing them to the chariot of China’s sovereignty and its cultural project. Behind their seemingly aggressive nationalist slurs are consumer practices lifted out of their rich and contested contexts and reduced to entertainment gratifications and aesthetic appetites presumably shared by all Chinese. The raging voices of Chinese cyber nationalism, despite their repeated threats to fight at all costs for national unity, are filled up with an overtone of preserving the *status quo*.

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