THE DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL EFFECTS OF
NATIONALIST ACTIVISM IN THE CHINESE ONLINE SPHERE

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With its increasing speed, volume, and global circulation of information and ideas, the Internet has revolutionized almost every aspect of our daily lives in recent decades. As a result, new technology has enabled state governments to optimize their nationalistic activism using the Internet to promote the regime’s beliefs and persuade the public that it is performing effectively and equitably – a technique otherwise referred to as ‘mass persuasion’ (Brady 2009). Academics have consequently studied the political implications of the Internet revolution in general, and its impact under various social, cultural, and political circumstances in particular (Zheng and Wu 2005). However, scholars are only just beginning to study online Chinese nationalist activism – a government led political movement used to distract citizens from the state’s inability to meet demands, generate public support for state interests, and gain domestic political advantages for elites as a result of government propaganda – and its effect on domestic and international politics.

This article evaluates the Chinese government’s use of online nationalist activism to achieve these goals, namely to increase the CCP’s legitimacy, rally domestic support, and mobilize citizens. Although Chinese leaders and elites have employed nationalist activism for decades, the rapid development of the Internet, and its capabilities, has brought about dramatic political changes and challenges, both domestically and internationally. My main argument is threefold. First, the Internet has changed nationalist activism and communication between the state and society. Second, the Internet boosts civic engagement and political participation. And third, the interaction of state and societal strategies determine collective actions and can influence domestic and international politics.

This article proceeds in the following way. The first section provides a brief analysis of the evolution of Chinese nationalism, followed by a subsequent section on the growth and
development of its online sphere. The third section attempts to identify how the Internet recruits activists and spurs civic engagement and political participation with and in nationalist campaigns. The fourth includes a historical analysis of Chinese online nationalist reactions to Sino-Japanese tensions by examining interactions between the Chinese state and population, the population’s use of the Internet to act collectively, and its subsequent influence on domestic and international politics in varying ways.¹

EVOLUTION OF CHINESE NATIONALISM

The Chinese communist movement in the late 1940’s represents the first nationalist movement, and communist victory, for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) following the 1911 Chinese Revolution. Their defeat of the Nationalist Party (GMD) has been largely attributed to its “ability to appeal to the sentiment of public nationalism” (Tang and Darr 2012). Over the course of the next three decades, Chinese nationalism thrived along Marxist ideology under communist rule.

It was not until the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and massacre, as well as the decline of Marxist, Leninist and Maoist ideology during end of the Cold War that CCP nationalism was met with any substantial challenge or protest. It was this period of rampant corruption among state officials, periodic inflation, and widespread unemployment that forced the CCP to modernize its propaganda work and promote nationalism through mass persuasion as a means of legitimizing China. Prior to this messaging overhaul, the CCP used Marxism to validate itself, but after 1989 – with the Cold War winding down – this approach was no longer believable or viable. Thus, new emphasis was placed on amended nationalist goals which focused on the party’s success in

¹ Please note, this paper and analytic model is based on that used by Yongnian Sheng and Guoguang Wu in their Comparative Politics Studies article, “Information Technology: Public Space, and Collective Action in China”
establishing China as a powerful state; and it also increased acknowledgement of the CCP's economic goals and political declarations to substantiate the party as a necessary force for ensuring stability and continued economic growth (Downs and Saunders 1998).

But the state also recognized its need to modernize its propaganda work in order for this nationalist focus to be successful. The late ‘80s and early ‘90s marketed a period of political consolidation, with the review of past policies, and study of Socialist and Western state experiences (Brady 2009). The remainder of the decade included radical reform in party propaganda work, with the most notable policy changes relating to the system of funding and the “introduction of new technology and methodology into propaganda and thought work” (Brady 2009). The early to mid 2000s mark the period with which we are now most familiar. It is a new era of confidence for the CCP and their potential to maintain its hold on power. This confidence reflects a new basis for CCP legitimacy, one in which Party documents have been formally incorporated, where the public sphere is tightly controlled but allows for a wide range of topics, and that includes China’s promotion of a new “China model” to its remaining allies (Brady 2009).

In combination with these dramatic economic, social and political changes, the party also implemented mass communication methodology. Traditionally a Western method, this form of communication introduced China to a new set of research methods (e.g. quantitative analysis and public opinion polls), and potential formats and strategies for the privatization and modernization of various propaganda sectors to deal with globalization (Brady 2009). It is during this time that we can see Chinese media propagating commercialized, nationalistic messages provided or monitored by the states. As a result, most Chinese media toolkits consist of content that make the CCP look able and fair, and emphasize confidence. Efforts to achieve these goals include the
following: “strengthening notions of both the ‘Other’ and the Chinese ‘Self;’ an ongoing effort to present a negative picture of post-communist societies so as to bolster fears of the potential for chaos in China if the CCP were to be overturned; image building activities that mold public opinion in favor of both the CCP and the PLA; and targeted campaigns focusing on perceived threats to CCP power” (Brady 2002).

For the time being, it would appear that these efforts are paying off. In their analysis of “Chinese Nationalism and its Political Social Origins,” Tang and Darr (2012) sought to measure the relative degree of Chinese nationalism as compared to other societies. Using factor analysis with a feeling thermometer index, which ranges from 1 to 100 in both the 2008 China Survey and in the 2003 ISSP National Identity Survey, the authors discover that China shows the highest level of nationalism among 35 countries and regions.

Figure 1. Nationalism: an international comparison.
Note: Nationalism is an imputed factor index of four survey questions (see Table 1). The scale ranges from 0 to 100.


Yet, for as promising as these results are, or as much potential as these nationalist messages have to increase the CCP’s legitimacy and number of activists, they have the matching potential to cause international and/or domestic conflict. Downs and Saunders (1998) identify three themes that have emerged in literature relating to benefits of nationalism, as well as their congruent dangers. The first identifies nationalism as a welcomed distraction from the state’s inability to meet societal demands. The second propagates nationalist myths to generate public support for state interests. And the third emphasizes political elites and their use of nationalism to gain domestic political advantages (Downs and Saunders 1998). However, nationalism can also aggravate ethnic relations, inciting domestic and international conflicts. In these situations, elites and government officials become trapped in their own rhetoric, forcing them to employ risky strategies rather than jeopardize their rule. Furthermore, nationalist myths can be misinterpreted by other states, giving rise to the security dilemma (Downs and Saunders 1998). In this way, Chinese nationalism can sometimes act as a double-edged sword, threatening to cut the man that bears it if not properly wielded. Managing these risks is especially difficult given the unruly and ever evolving nature of the Internet.

THE RAMPANT GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF CHINA’S ONLINE SPHERE

“We know how much the Internet has changed America, and we are already an open society. Imagine how much it could change China.
Now, there's no question China has been trying to crack down on the Internet – good luck. That's sort of like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall. But I would argue to you that their effort to do that just proves how real these changes are and how much they threaten the status quo. It's not an argument for slowing down the effort to bring China into the world; it's an argument for accelerating that effort. In the knowledge economy, economic innovation and political empowerment, whether anyone likes it or not, will inevitably go hand in hand.”

-- Former U.S. President Bill Clinton speaking on China at Johns Hopkins University, March 8, 2000

In the early years of the Internet, there was an expectation that the Chinese government would be unable to censor the Internet, eventually forcing the state to decide between cutting itself off from modern technology or giving up its authoritarian politics. Former U.S. President Bill Clinton’s speech reflects popular opinion during the Internet revolution, with many believing that the web was too large and widely dispersed to possibly be blocked or contained. To attempt to limit its reach would be, as Clinton phrased it, like “trying to nail Jell-O to the wall.” As a result, scholars of this period also suggested that China’s acceptance of the Internet would perhaps lead to democracy and/or a regime change in China. This change, it was suggested, would be the result of increased access to information and ideas from around the world, a platform to air grievances and interests, and a virtual ‘public sphere’ to associate with others (Breslin and Shen 2010).

Today, scholars recognize a dramatically different reality. Not only has Chinese authoritarian rule survived the Internet, but it has also been strengthened by it. With a great deal of skill, China has rewritten the Internet’s rules to serve its own agenda: gaining firm control over society and setting an example for other repressive regimes (A Giant Cage 2013). The CCP has systematically financed and implemented large-scale software projects and development;
including the ‘Great Firewall,’ which keeps out “undesirable foreign websites, and the ‘Golden Shield,’ which monitors activities within China (A Giant Cage 2013).

The success of these projects is that much more staggering considering how China has more Internet users than the United States has citizens. According to a 2010 White Paper provided by Chinese officials, roughly 384 million users – 30 percent of the state’s population – had Internet access by the end of 2009. This is compared to the 150,000 Chinese who had access less than a decade earlier (Barme and Ye 1997). Figure 2 (Zheng and Wu 2005) offers a visual representation of this growth between 1997 and 2004; years marked by a new era of confidence for the CCP and the introduction of new technology and propaganda work to promote nationalism (Brady 2009).

Figure 2. Growth of Internet Users in China, October 1997-January 2004


2 Reported to have risen to 560 million in 2013 (A Giant Cage 2013)
So what was the Chinese government’s motivation for such quick and widespread expansion? The PRC’s Information Office of the State Council claims that the government is interested in 1) making the Internet ‘part of the state infrastructure,’ and 2) enabling Chinese citizens to freely express their opinions. However, research suggests that this period of technological modernization correlates with the party’s efforts to rejuvenate its propaganda work – a much more likely motivation for quick and vast Internet expansion. In fact, Brady (2009) identifies that one of China’s efforts includes the encouragement of Chinese media to go online, recognizing that the Internet is a tool for government that should be embraced and used to promote nationalism and encourage state activism. However, this online activism is not without its restrictions (Zheng and Wu 2005).

STATE CONTROLS AND MANAGEMENT OF CHINA'S ONLINE SPHERE AND NATIONALISTIC ACTIVISM THROUGH COMMERCIALIZED CAMPAIGNS

Validating the Chinese government’s efforts to promote nationalism online are the following official statistics: more than 457 million bloggers and 72 million blogs existed in China by the end of 2007, many of which addressed some political element (CNNIC 2007). By the end of 2008, Chinese Internet users were acknowledged for spending more time online than Internet users in any other country. They were also more likely to contribute to various forms of online social networking sites – such as blogs, forums, chat rooms, photo or video-sharing websites, etc. – than all other countries surveyed, except Korea and France (TNS Global Interactive 2008). These statistics help to explain why the Internet has become the font-line battleground in China’s new "informational politics" (Yang 2008).
Given the potential of these online tools considering the size and scope of China's internet using population, the government has established a strict network of controls and management of the media, balancing just enough information flow to appease citizens, but not so much that users have an opportunity to effectively use it as a political tool against the CCP. To achieve this delicate equilibrium, China employs what Rebecca MacKinnon (2011) refers to as "networked authoritarianism." Under this online regime, the single ruling party remains in control while a wide range of conversations about the country's problems nonetheless occur on the Internet. The government then follows these online conversations, sometimes responding to grievances with policy reforms; thereby making the average person feel as if they have a much greater sense of freedom than they actually do. However, under networked authoritarianism, there is no guarantee of individual rights and freedoms – "actors perceived to be threats to the state are jailed; free and fair elections are not held; and the courts and the legal system are tools of the ruling party" (MacKinnon 2011, 33).

Furthermore, a 2004-05 study of Chinese Internet censorship concluded, "China operates the most extensive, technologically sophisticated, and broad reaching system of Internet filtering in the world" (OpenNet Initiative 2005). Most commonly, the international community thinks of China's advanced content filtering systems when they consider Chinese internet censorship: the "Great Firewall of China," which blacklists website addresses and keywords into advanced routers and systems to control Internet traffic across Chinese domestic networks; and the state's "Golden Shield Project," a "broad project focused on surveillance, data mining and the upgrading of Internet public security networks, of which Internet filtering is only a small part" (MacKinnon 2009). These initiatives require the employment of thousands of "Internet police," who are located in various cities and empowered to determine which websites and posts are blocked to
users of domestic Chinese internet services – it is predicted that tens of thousands of oversees websites are already blocked (MacKinnon 2009).

Receiving less attention are the private citizens in every providence and city who are "enlisted as volunteers or paid commentators to 'guide' online conversations in a pro-government direction or to act as watchdogs, reporting anti-government conversations to authorities" (MacKinnon 2009; Bandurski 2008). Similar to "astroturfing" in the United States – a technique used by commercial advertising firms, public relations companies, and election campaigns to simulate grassroots enthusiasm for a product or candidate – this public outreach is a clear example of a CCP's commercialized online nationalist campaign strategy that is used to promote the party’s nationalist agenda, distract from its faults, and highlight its efficiency and relevance. Due to the state’s strict commitment to this agenda, the 2009 Committee to Protect Journalists listed China as the world's worst jailer of journalists; often arresting those who speak out against or challenge the CCP via both traditional and online media platforms (MacKinnon 2011).

ONLINE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Yet, despite these advanced controls and restrictions, more than 66 percent of the Chinese population frequently use the Internet to discuss various topics, express opinions, and represent interests through online posts (The Internet in China 2015). Given the Chinese Internet's ability to reach vast audiences, it is easy to see why the state has placed so much value in its development as a tool for promoting nationalistic agendas and activism. An important component of this nationalist online activism is the increase in online civil engagement and the rise of civil society as a result of online tools. These changes in civic behavior enforce the balance that the CCP is working so carefully to construct: provide citizens with enough freedom
to make them feel as if they have a voice, but silence those opinions that may jeopardize the party's legitimacy and/or objectives.

Early discussions of the Internet debated its effects for engaging people in politics. Some, like Rheinhold (2000), asserted that the Internet would promote political participation in politics, while others, including Putnam (2000) and Sunstein (2001), argued that it would inhibit engagement in public life. Interestingly, 2003 Chinese survey data addresses this debate in regard to urban Internet use in 12 Chinese cities (see figures 3-5). Figure 3 reveals that an overwhelming majority of people do not think the Internet has a negative impact on their public engagement in public life; in fact, 47 percent of respondents indicated that access to the Internet increased their contact with like-minded people.

**Figure 3. The Internet and Interpersonal Interaction in China (2003)**


*Note: A = Has the use of Internet increased or decreased your contact with people who share or
hobbies/recreational activities? B = Has the use of Internet increased or decreased your contact with people who share your political interests? C = Has the use of Internet increased or decreased your contact with people who share your profession? E = Has the use of Internet increased or decreased your contact with people with your family and friends.

Furthermore, figures 4 and 5 measure the Internet's substantial political impact over that seen in democratic countries. Nearly 80 percent of the people in China think that their internet usage can help them better understand politics, as compared to only 43 percent in the United States, 31 percent in Japan, and 48 percent in South Korea (see Figure 4). Also, nearly 61 percent of Chinese respondents think that they can have more to say about the government's policies and actions as a result of their internet participation; this is compared to 20 percent in the US, 24 percent in Japan, and 26 percent in South Korea (see Figure 5). These results indicate strong civic engagement and faith by the Chinese people for the CCP party and PRC government -- indicating the success of China's online nationalist activism in promoting legitimacy and trust.

![Bar chart showing results from Figure 4.](chart)

**Figure 4. Do You Think by Using the Internet People Like You Can Better Understand Politics?** (all respondents, 18 and above)

METHODOLOGY

As Tang and Darr (2012) note, “the study of Chinese nationalism often does not fit neatly into the study of nationalism more generally.” Unlike other states, China was never fully colonized (like most developing countries); it inherited the legacy of an empire; and it is an empire-turned-nation (unlike the modal case of nationalism as a reaction to the oppression of an empire), suggesting that some of the main victims of contemporary nationalism are those whom it is forced upon, such as Tibetans (Tang and Darr 2012). However, despite its historical uniqueness, I believe there is much to be learned by considering China as an example of the
broader phenomenon of nationalism. After all, despite varied histories and attributes, all states have an interest in promoting national identity, thereby justifying individual-level measures of national pride across national borders (Tang and Darr 2012). There are also many types of Chinese nationalism to be considered: ethnic nationalism, liberal nationalism, state nationalism, pragmatic nationalism, elite nationalism, mass nationalism, etc. However, in this paper’s historical analysis, I focus on public or mass nationalism.

I will evaluate the success of Chinese online nationalistic efforts through a brief historical analysis of two Sino-Japanese diplomatic disputes: 1) Chinese opposition to Japanese pursuit of a permanent seat on the UN Security Council (UNSC); and 2) territorial disputes over Diaoyu Islands. Despite being well studied in academia, I choose to focus my attention on these two cases due to their visible intensity and magnitude of popular mobilization in both domestic and international politics. Furthermore, China’s long and varied history with Japan offers a unique opportunity to test the surge of popular nationalism, which I’ve previously implied “is often attributed to mixed memories and feelings about China’s glorious past as well as humiliations suffered at the hand of foreign forces” (Hyun et al. 2014). I will conclude by reviewing and analyzing qualitative results obtained by Hyun, Kim and Sun via an online Chinese survey.

Based on my analyses of these conditions, I will either prove or disprove the following three hypotheses:

*H1. The Internet has changed nationalist activism and communication between the state and society.*

*H2. The Internet boosts civic engagement and political participation.*

*H3. The interaction of state and societal strategies determine collective actions and can influence domestic and international politics.*
HISTORICAL ANALYSES

According to Shambaugh (2013), modern Chinese nationalism, carries two distinct aspects: the first is that “China is an aggrieved nation that has endured a ‘century of shame and humiliation’ and various indignities at the hands of the West and Japan; and second, China has been a great power historically and deserves to return to that status” (Shambaugh 2013). Chinese reactions to these diplomatic cries have “revealed a public desire to redeem past indignities inflicted by foreign powers and to restore national pride and international recognition (Brittingham 2007; Gries, 2004). It is this sort of reactive behavior that that characterizes online nationalist activism in China to be ever-changing in response to provocations; but also lacking any coherent ideological tenor (Wu 2007; Breslin & Shen 2010).

Chinese Opposition to Permanent Japanese Seat on UN Security Council

During the first wave of anti-Japanese online activism in 2005, the “number of websites dedicated to opposing the Japanese attempt at UNSC membership increased greatly” (Hyun et al 2014). Most notably, a call for online petitions against the proposed permanent Japanese Security Council seat received tens of million signatures within only a few months and was followed by offline protests in major Chinese cities (Liu 2010, Reilly 2010, Wu 2007). Their objections were based on both Japan’s bid for permanent membership on the UN Security Council and its justification and glorification of the Japanese empire’s colonial rule in Asia (Liu 2010).

Yet, what was particularly dynamic about these protests was the significant use of the Internet and mobile devices to share protest information and mobilize nationalist activists (Liu 2010). Such online nationalist behavior sparked a wave of popular nationalism, which ultimately
undermined pragmatic and liberal conflict resolution approaches to Japan (Reilly, 2010). **Sino-Japanese Disputes Over The Diaoyu Islands**

A similar display on mass nationalism occurred seven years later regarding the sovereignty of the Diaoyu Islands. Debates regarding this group of islands in the East China Sea also sparked anti-Japanese online activism in 2012. Having lost the islands to Japan during China’s defeat in the 1895 Sino-Japanese War, this territorial dispute was an intermittent topic of discussion in Chinese cyberspace (Hyun et al 2014). However, it resurfaced following the Japanese government’s attempt to purchase the islands from a private Japanese owner. In response, nationalist actors took to the streets and used online platforms to ask for anti-Japanese boycotts and to incite protests that spread across China (Hyun et al 2014). The demonstrations, which included such violent acts as the tearing of Japanese flags and destroying Japanese goods, eventually required police intervention (Branigan 2012).

The islands, which are surrounded by rich energy resources and fisheries, are fraught with sovereignty claims by both Chinese and Japanese activists. In this historical instance, the announcement that Tokyo’s nationalist governor Shintaro Ishihara was interested in buying and developing the uninhabited islands further threaten China’s claims and provoked national outcry. Ian Storey, an expert on maritime issues at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, was quoted saying: “Ishihara is extremely rightwing and ultra-nationalist and if he controlled these islands there is no telling what he might do with them. It seems almost like he wants to provoke China on this. The Japanese government clearly does not” (Branigan 2012). In this sense, it would appear as if this case represents two competing forms of nationalism: Chinese vs. Japanese. Most impressively, Chinese activists used the Internet to mobilize themselves based on
nationalist feelings and voice their outrage over the situation. Subsequently, China surrounded the island with vessels, in addition to the rise of civil society in the form of nationalist protests. Additionally, diffusion of anti-Japanese sentiment exasperated negative public sentiments toward Japan and directly affected domestic strategies and international affairs.

**Hyun, Kim and Sun’s Findings Regarding Nationalism and Sino-Japanese Conflicts**

Hyun et al. (2014) takes this research one step further, using online survey data collected from 544 individuals to determine “the effects of news use from traditional and new media, nationalistic attitudes, and motivations for Internet use on anti-Japanese political behaviors such as boycotting and protest participation.” Although survey participants were younger and more educated that the general Chinese population – most were between the ages of 18 and 30 years old (65.8 percent) with a 4-year degree (62.5 percent) – and approximately a quarter of them reported themselves as a communist party member (26.3 percent), I believe the study provides valuable insights regarding new media technologies in China’s political and media contexts and how Chinese nationalist online activism gains influence.

To determine the respondents’ nationalistic attitudes, the authors developed an index “by summing their indications of the extent to which they agree with each of the following two statements: ‘China is better than most other countries,’ and ‘The world would be a better place if people were more like the Chinese’” (Hyun et al. 2014). Their findings suggest that nationalism was not related to participant motivations for gathering alternative information about the disputes (See Figure 6). However, nationalism did have a positive relationship with anti-Japanese behavior in the final analysis, including all the control variables, media use, and motivations variables (See Figure 7) (Hyun et al. 2014). Furthermore, the data suggests that males and the elderly tend to more frequently engage in anti-Japanese actions than other respondents.
Figure 6. Predictors of the four motivations of Internet use specific to Sino-Japanese disputes.


Note: Cell entries are standardized regression coefficients; Gender (male = 1); CCP membership (member = 1). +p < .10, *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Most interesting, was the link between social media news use and nationalism, which the authors go on to explain in two ways. First, social media news may replicate mainstream news media coverage, and therefore reinforces nationalism promoted in state-controlled news media (Hyun et al. 2014). Second, “social media may serve as an independent source of news and information about nationalism… [and may therefore affirm] the observation that social media are often used as a mobilizing medium for nationalistic causes” and may represent popular nationalism sentiment (Hyun et al. 2014).

Analysis also revealed that a strong nationalist attitude was correlated with increased Internet use for information-seeking, social interaction purposes and entertainment, suggesting that nationalism is the main source driving people’s need for the Internet during disputes.
CONCLUSIONS

Based on these results, it is obvious that the Internet has dramatically altered the way in which the Chinese state and its people communicate. For some it means posting and monitoring online blogs and information in support of the CCP, for others, it involves the use of proxy servers to gather uncensored information (not closely examined in this paper since only 0.6 percent of surveyed Internet users admitted to frequently using proxy servers, and no more than 6.3 percent sometimes or often use them (Guo et al 2005). It is also clear based on literary
analysis that Internet use boosts civic engagement and political participation, though Hyun et al. suggest that the inverse may also be true – strong nationalist political sentiments may boost Internet usage. Finally, this paper’s historical analyses of recent Sino-Japanese relations highlight the ability of online nationalist activism to influence domestic and international affairs.

Despite being a relatively modern phenomenon, nationalism is one of the most powerful forces of collective action. The ability of Chinese activists to mobilize citizens to promote nationalist agendas can have incredible domestic and international effects, especially since the Chinese population consists of more than 1.3 billion people. This topic of nationalistic activism in the online sphere will continue to become more relevant as China continues to ‘loosen’ its censorship grip and discussion and information shared among Chinese citizens continues to grow.

For these reasons, further research and data regarding the topic is necessary. In attempting to empirically evaluate the role of Chinese online activism, I repeatedly struggled to find substantive data and information from which I could confidently extract valuable information. However, with sufficient information and data, it would be interesting to further research and understand online nationalist movements that act against the state – holding government officials responsible for corruption. Additionally, examining China’s assumed online nationalist successes, such as the 2008 Beijing Olympics, would also provide valuable insights regarding the power and influence of the Internet to promote nationalist ideas and influence public opinion.
REFERENCES


