

**Civilisation Online:
How the Internet challenges elite discourses of the Chinese nation(s)**

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Abstract

The Internet is widely believed to bring about world democracy, the overthrow of authoritarian regimes as well as the end of nations and national identity. While empirical studies of Internet discourse have found that nationalist sentiment is not only unchecked but characterises the bulk of online political debate, existing studies of online Chinese nationalism that assume the eventual demise of national identity tend to rely on the instrumentalist view of national identity. While, this instrumentalist view considers the nation as an invented narrative of manipulative political elites, a 'postmodern' account of the nation recognises instead, that the nation is contested by multiple discourses of relations with significant others. Using this framework of contested discourses, this study seeks to re-examine the impact of the Internet on the future of national identity, and a comparison of mediated and online discourse in mainland China and Hong Kong surrounding the September 11th attacks against the United States suggests that the online discourse of the Chinese nation are a modern, grassroots, transborder inflection of the traditional Chinese worldview and differ from both the state-endorsed nation of the mainland Chinese press and from the nation constructed by westernised elites privileged in the Hong Kong press.

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Introduction

The rise of the global media system, as was with many things global, was tipped to bring about a modernist utopia in which authoritarian regimes would fall, free trade would end poverty and national hatreds and conflicts would be a thing of the past. Foremost among the symbol of our global times is the Internet. With transnational reach and a decentralised structure that would allow online forums of democratic resistance, the Internet would cause the collapse of the Chinese Government, leading to freedom and Western-style democracy as well as bring about the end of Chinese nationalism, often portrayed in the West as being a little more than an unfortunate consequence of Chinese communist propaganda.

However, the image of the Internet as a medium with cosmopolitanising effects has been challenged by a growing body of empirical evidence and reports of online nationalism is itself becoming banal. In regards to Chinese nationalism, studies of Usenet forums have suggested that the dominant mode of political discussion in ethnic-Chinese forums have been overwhelmingly nationalist (Fung and Kedl, 2001; Kuan, 2001; Ma and Yuen, 2002; Qiu, 1999; Qiu, 2000 *inter alia*). These existing studies of online Chinese nationalism tend to portray Chinese nationalist discourse as an online reflection of nationalist propaganda produced by the ruling elite. Qiu (2000), for example, believes that the prevalence of online nationalist discourse in China is due to the fact that online users tend to be privileged male university students close to the centres of political power and who have vested interests in maintaining the existing authoritarian regime. Furthermore, in an attempt to explain the prevalence of nationalist discourse, Qiu (2000) believes that government censoring ensures that messages at odds with the official-line are promptly removed, leading to the appearance of an overwhelming majority of pro-government, nationalistic messages online.

However, explanations of online nationalism that rely on control of particular demographics through methods such as incentive and punishment or censorship are unable to explain why nationalist discourse is found outside of the control of authoritarian states and are contributed to by an increasingly wide demographic – many ethnic-Chinese forums in the West also have nationalist leanings. These

explanations of Chinese nationalism believe that nationalism is instrumental – i.e. invented by government elites for the purposes of Machiavellian control. Consequently, by demonising Chinese identity as a form of false consciousness, in which Chinese are waiting to be awakened by Western liberators, such studies play into Orientalist notions of a Chinese people oppressed by a Communist government, waiting to be saved by the West.

Rather than working along the lines of a simple propaganda model in which the nation is unproblematically unified by an all-powerful mass media, the Chinese nation, like any other nation, is constantly under contestation, being defined by multiple discourses of varying credibility – some more invented than others (Duara, 1996). Consequently, studies of how the Internet might impact the future of the nation must to examine how changes in power-geometry (Pieterse, 1995) brought about by the Internet can alter the scope of discourses of national identity.

Based on this understanding of a decentred national identity constantly contested by multiple discourses of Self and Other, this study questions the Orientalist imagery of online Chinese nationalism as a reflection of state instrumentalism. By examining the discourse surrounding the September 11th attacks, which evoked a variety of strong and divergent views by Chinese regarding its others – Americans and Arabs, I argue that these divergent interpretations of the September 11th attacks are based upon divergent discourses of the Chinese nation. I argue that online discourses of Chinese identity differ from and challenge the elite discourses of nation found in the mainstream media in Hong Kong and mainland China. These two places represent two conflicting discourses of nation constructed by political elites in two ideologically and institutionally divergent regimes and whereas mediated discourses in these two places tend to frame events according to the consensus of the political elite – a westernised capitalist elite in Hong Kong and an authoritarian elite in the mainland, online discourses of the Chinese nation are based upon a traditional grassroots discourse common to but marginalised in both places. This discourse now finds refuge on the Internet and subverts both the elites' monopoly of interpretation within its political borders and by proposing alternative and converging definitions of the nation in both sites, provides the ideological resources that may eventually subvert the borders themselves. This paper mainly concerns itself with distinguishing between and interpreting these three discourses of nation.

Competing Discourses of the Chinese Nation

Perhaps nowhere else was the contested nature of national narratives more apparent than in both Chinese and American public discourse in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York. Americans and those with access to American media were confronted daily with politicians and celebrities confirming the chosenness of the American people and interpreting the bombing as an attack on freedom itself. Alternatives to the dominant interpretation of events were met with a harsh response in the media.

While the trauma of September 11 was largely able to suppress contested notions of America in Washington's favour, interpretations of the event differed widely in the Chinese sphere. In contrast to many global media events that elicit indistinguishable responses from different discourses of nation, the discourse surrounding the September 11th attacks allowed us to examine how different national narratives can diverge markedly with regard to a single global media event. While Hong Kong and mainland Chinese reporting of the September 11th attacks was mainly subdued and vaguely supportive of America for the large part, online discourses in both Hong Kong and China were critical and vitriolic. This mismatch between interpretations in the mass media and the Internet suggests a difference between online and mediated discourses of nation and discourse analysis was carried out in order to identify the national identities that underlie these differing interpretations.

Method

Representing online and offline media respectively, Internet and newspaper discourse surrounding the September 11th incident was sampled for discursive analysis. Discourse analysis allows us to draw a link between media texts and the discursive packages that frame them. In this case, I wished to examine the differences in discourses of national identity that led to differences in how the September 11th attacks were interpreted.

Using samples from a large variety of newspapers taken archived by the *Wiseneews*¹ search engine, which archives primarily Chinese language newspapers and magazines, stories mentioning the September 11th attacks from Hong Kong (n=1476) and the mainland (n=414) were sampled over a one month period from 12

¹ <http://www.wiseneews.com/>

A full list of Hong Kong and Mainland papers covered by *Wiseneews* is available online.

September 2001 to 12 October 2001.

Internet sources from major Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong web-based bulletin boards were sampled. In the Chinese mainland, *Qiangguo Luntan*² (“Strong Nation Forum”), a government run forum and by far the most frequently accessed forum in China and *Netease*³, a popular commercial portal were chosen to represent a mix of government and commercial forums. These were sampled only for one week from 12 September to 19 September⁴.

As the Hong Kong government does not offer a public website for political debate, both sites samples in Hong Kong were commercial. *Uzone21*⁵ and the Hong Kong edition of *Sina*⁶ were chosen to represent popular websites and were sample for one month from September 12, 2001 to October 12, 2001. As the architecture of Hong Kong sites were different from that of the mainland sites, sampling of these sites was done by searching for topics related to September 11th⁷.

Results and Analysis

Mediated Discourse in Mainland China: the Nation as State

Somewhat as expected, interpretations of the September 11 attacks in the mainland press were congruent with the dominant discourse of nation proposed by the

² <http://ww.qglt.com.cn/>

³ <http://www.netease.com/>

⁴ The relatively short sampling duration of online mainland Chinese texts (1 week) in relation to mediated texts (1 month) and online texts in Hong Kong was due to several factors. Firstly, the massive number of postings on public forums on the mainland as well as the occurrence of sporadic deletion due to government censorship policies on the mainland presented technical problems for sampling. For example, due to the inflammatory nature of debate during the September 11th incident, all posts from May 30, 2001 to November 10, 2001 were deleted. However, discussion throughout the week sampled was consistent and hence there was little reason to doubt that the weekly sample would not have been representative of the entire month, albeit with a decreasing intensity of participation as participants lost interest. Although sampling size and sampling methodology was restricted, they are still adequate for use in discourse analysis.

⁵ <http://www.uzone21.com/>

⁶ <http://www.sina.com.hk/>

⁷ The appendix include the complete list of keywords that were used to search for topics. Keywords were chosen to elicit as sample that was as ideologically neutral as possible.

communist party elite and were largely in line with the classic themes that emphasise the Chinese state's concern with the loyalty of its citizens to the Party as well as China's equal place among a family of nations in opposition to a Western-led post-imperial hierarchy, usually expressed in the oblique Chinese press in terms of multipolarity and anti-imperialism.

Using a mixture of silences, de-emphasis and neutral reporting that lacked political commentary, Chinese reports attempted to deny the global importance given to the event by the international media and sought to portray September 11th as "just another tragedy", equal in significance, perhaps, to a quickly forgotten flood in India or a neglected war in Central Africa. A search for related articles indicated showed scant coverage of the event (414 articles total; 41 relevant articles involving September 11th or equivalent in the title) and the event was downplayed by the official government papers such as the Beijing Youth News to such an extent that it was promptly picked up by the Washington Post (September 14, 2001 p26) which lambasted China for "relegating the attacks to the inside pages." Although the event could not be completely ignored, the majority of reports consisted of bland neutral reporting of the attacks and the ensuing effects, if any, on national economic growth. This de-senationalisation of the event sought to downplay America's privileged position in the global news order and also sought to position China's place in a global community of equals. In fact, the only politicised reporting of the attacks were reports of President Jiang Zemin's condemnation of terrorism which further played into China's performance as a responsible and respected member of the international state order naturally opposed to the forces of chaos and global instability.

The only criticisms of the United States in the mainland media were hidden behind "expert technical" discourses, one of which criticised the CIA and FBI of not acting on intelligence reports and another which criticised the American government for concentrating its telecommunications backbone within a single area, which suffered extensive damage from the attacks. These criticisms implied a failure of the US government to protect its citizens and was interpreted within the traditional Chinese trope of the father and son relationship. Hence, while America's failure to protect its citizens from disaster was seen as the failing of the state's responsibility as a good father, the Chinese state's authoritarian repression could be in turn, be interpreted as the strict but well intentioned custodianship of a responsible father, for which, the Chinese citizen should repay with filial loyalty.

Mediated Discourse in Hong Kong: Manhattan of the East

In contrast to the silence of the mainland Chinese press, Hong Kong's media was saturated in coverage of the September 11th event (1476 articles total; 179 relevant articles involving September 11th or equivalent in the title) with many articles sympathising with the American victims. The events of September 11 were interpreted within the context of a nation defined by the Westernised Hong Kong elite. This Hong Kong nation, very much separate from the mainland Chinese Other across the border, describes itself as the "Pearl of the Orient" and the "Manhattan of the East" and these themes have become no less prominent in the state-endorsed tourist discourse of post-Handover Hong Kong. Hong Kong prides itself on a free market economy and wide individual freedoms, and simultaneously aspires to and boasts of being a (westernised) Global City.

As was the case in mainland China, Hong Kong's mediated discourse was dominated by neutral reporting, economic and business considerations that also included a strong entertainment news element. However, in contrast to the mainland's more traditional style of journalism, Hong Kong's sensationalist tendencies localized and personalized the event. Several articles with sensationalist titles such as "Imagine Hong Kong's September 11th" (Apple Daily, September 19, 2001 E14) compared Hong Kong's government to New York's and subverted the local government narrative of "Manhattan of the East" to criticize local government and public culture. Another story named Hong Kong's Chief Executive, Tung Chee Wah, as the "Hong Kong (Bin) Ladin" These criticisms were less aimed at the Hong Kong community as it was at the local government, which is widely regarded as the puppet of the Chinese regime. Hence, in the popular press, the government is often viewed not as part of Hong Kong, but as part of the Other across the border which threatens to turn Hong Kong from a vibrant (westernised) global cosmopolis to "just another middle-sized Chinese city".

In addition to using the September 11th attacks to subvert the local government, the event was used to confirm Hong Kong's (aspired) position in the global cultural order. Articles telling of the personal feelings of Hong Kong celebrities play a prominent part of the secondary reporting of September 11th and reports of Jackie Chan giving blood to the victims helped to play into the local narrative of Hong Kong's engagement with the world and its cultural relevance through international stars such as Jacky Chan.

Online Discourse in Hong Kong and Mainland China

The Internet offered a vast array of sites in which one could offer one's own interpretation of the September 11th attacks and these sites were heavily utilised by Chinese netizens with over ten thousand posts in the first week alone for the popular *Qiangguo Luntan*. In Hong Kong, where the culture of avoiding politics usually shuts out political discussion at an interpersonal level, commercial web-based forums such as *Yahoo* and *Uzone21* became sites for debate among the young and Internet literate (Sing Tao Daily, September 21, 2001 A44 and September 25, A36) while in the mainland, the online colossus *Qiangguo Luntan* was the prime site for debate with university sites such as Beijing University's *Weiming BBS* ("No-name BBS") and commercial sites such as *Netease* also popular.

Apart from sporadic and indiscriminate censoring of emails, online forums lacked the well-established institution of controls found in the mass media. However, the range of online interpretations was only slightly more diverse than the attempted univocality of mediated discourse. This relative diversity was comprised of a debate between two groups – a pro-American and an anti-American group. However, these two views were by no means equally represented. While postings on commercial websites in both Hong Kong and the mainland were vastly critical of the United States (over 90% anti-American), ironically, *Qiangguo Luntan* - a forum run by the state-controlled Xinhua News Agency, offered a more balanced view (40% pro-American). Furthermore, counterintuitive to popular expectations of Hong Kong's relative pro-West stance, almost all postings in Hong Kong commercial forums rejected a pro-American reading of the event. Hence, although online forums offered alternate discourses upon which to frame the attacks, anti-American interpretations dominated.

Pro-American messages were largely concerned with sympathy towards the victims of the attacks and criticised the anti-American participants for gloating over the death of innocent civilians. Pro-American interpretations emphasised the immorality of killing civilians and derided both the terrorists and the online 'gloaters' as inhumane. By employing the same tactics as the American press, which both Orientalises the Arab attackers and usurps the personal tragedies of the victims, pro-American interpretations ran largely in line with Washington's preferred meanings, giving testament to the powerful hold the United States has on global narratives.

On the other hand, anti-American posts either essentialised Americans or de-essentialised the often forgotten Arab and Latin American victims of US foreign

policy and were framed within the national discourse of what I refer to as Chinese civilisationalism. The civilisationalist worldview sees China as the centre of world civilisation where to be civilised is defined as holding to Confucian values such as harmony and tolerance. This worldview faults Western military incursions and political interventions of the last two centuries as the reason for China's current material poverty and views both the West and Islam as warlike and barbaric. Framed within this discourse, the West-Arab conflict that is exemplified by September 11th confirms the insatiable ambition and intolerant nature that was the root of the West's continual incursions into Chinese territory since the 18th century.

The online discourse sampled employed two distinct rhetorical loci, both reflecting the civilisationalist interpretation of the event and employing the symbols of the Chinese *Ancien Regime*

The first line of argument involved online messages that expressed delight at seeing Americans attacked upon their own soil. Stressing the humiliations of Western slights of the near and distant past, these messages viewed the disaster as a much delayed consequence of bad karma sowed during the West's past imperial aggression and present-day political meddling. Recent disputes with China, such as the 1999 bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Yugoslavia and America's continued support for Taiwan figured prominently among the list of Western crimes along with the deaths of countless Yugoslavians and Arabs that were the victims of American foreign policy. But perhaps the most popular line of argument involved how the fighter pilot *Wu Wei*, who died in a collision with an American spy-plane, was avenged by the death of Americans. Employing the opposite strategy to the pro-American interpretation, this interpretation essentialises American casualties as Heaven's price for Western intransigence and de-essentialises the victims of US foreign policy.

While the above rhetorical strategy crossed the line of taboo by gloating over American casualties, the second rhetorical avenue avoids this by de-essentialising the deaths of both Americans victims of the bombing and Arab victims of American foreign policy. Participants who employed this strategy occupied a humanitarian, anti-war stance and held governments and politics accountable for the plight of these innocent civilians. However, rather than form the basis for a non-partisan interpretation, this relatively sophisticated rhetorical device resonated with the notion of Chinese cultural superiority in which the values of the humanitarianism were bound to the Confucian values of non-interference and social harmony and once again, the conflict between Arabs and the West reconfirmed their warlike,

unenlightened natures.

In both rhetorical strategies, the symbols employed clearly betrayed their origins in civilisationalist discourses of the Chinese nation. Firstly, pro-US participants were labelled “Japanese dwarf pirates”, an ancient Chinese depreciatory term for the Japanese, who often raided eastern Chinese ports. Furthermore, in stark contrast to Hong Kong’s elite discourse of China as the dark Other, the vast majority of participants on the Hong Kong website referred to themselves as “Zhongguoren” a term for Chinese that often has unificatory political overtones.

However, the most conspicuous signs of an underlying civilisationalism were manifested in several posts in both Hong Kong and the mainland that explicitly mentioned the notion of a Huntington’sesque *Clash of Civilisations*. While one participant believed that the US-led Western civilisation must fall before the Chinese civilisation would be able to rebuild itself, another post admonished the sympathisers of Arab victims of the ill feelings that Islamic civilisation has against “Buddhist and Confucian civilisation”.

Romance of the Three Nations

Rather than merely the simple virtual reflection of the state’s nation building efforts, online discourse of the Chinese nation seems to be of a different pedigree from that of offline discourses, exhibiting differences on several points.

Firstly, while the mediated discourses of the mainland’s State-as-Nation and Hong Kong’s Global City are elite discourses backed by visible political institutions, the civilisationalist discourse lacks significant support from elite institutions. Instead, the civilisationalist discourses seems to be based on dense webs of meaning cultivated through China’s long history of grassroots culture and a deeply historical tradition inherited from the pre-existing imperial regime.

Secondly, while the mediated discourses are supported by territorially bound institutions with well-defined jurisdictions, the civilisationalist discourse transcends administrative borders, threatening not only to transform Hong Kong and mainland China’s national discourses, but also to challenge the very boundary that separates the two.

Finally, while the boundaries dictated by the mediated discourses are more or less

territorial, Chinese civilisationalism is based upon traditional boundaries of ethnicity and common culture. This nation, founded upon the foundations of a Han/Confucian civilisation, often finds itself at odds with the state's brand of nation, which for reasons of state interest, defines the nation as a multiethnic People's Republic within a well-defined territory. For Hong Kong, this territorial-boundedness is even less uncertain than for a People's Republic of China troubled by separatism and border conflicts. Furthermore, while the territorial nature of both elite versions of the nation has allowed it to reject indigenous ideology for foreign communism or capitalism, pro-Confucian civilisationalists are ambivalent about the ideology of the current regime and often sympathise with a new regime based upon the traditional values of pre-modern China (albeit with contemporary modifications) that could provide for a future Chinese renaissance.

On the other hand, while these nations have competing notions of citizenship and uphold different sets of beliefs, to essentialise their differences would be to ignore their inherent hybridity and contested nature and to assume a crude understanding of the workings of discourse. We must recognise not only the polysemic nature of all discourse, but that these discourses are themselves constantly under reconstruction to cope with new ideological struggles and social realities and indeed their very existence relies in their ability to appropriate and subvert established webs of meaning. Hence, while the Chinese communist nation waged bloody war against reactionary traditional values, it appropriates the trope of the authoritarian father and filial son in order to justify its policies. Likewise, though the traditional Chinese worldview, like its German counterparts, banished filthy commerce to the bottom rung of human enterprise, modern inflections of Chinese civilisationalism, repackaged and sold under Lee Kuan Yew's banner of Asian Values, now justifies its political conservatism on the basis on none other than the *economic benefits* of social stability.

The Reconfigured National Frame

These findings correspond to the Lee et al's (2002) finding that even in a globalised mass media, national media continue to interpret global events according to their own elite discourses of nation.

The introduction of the Internet, rather than weaken the ability of nations to frame such global events and allowing an infinite diversity of interpretations, seems instead, in this case, to have liberated a forgotten grassroots nation. This nation,

marginalized from public view by the twin hegemonies of an authoritarian regime in the mainland and a set of professional values supported by a westernised legal-politico system in Hong Kong and with no institutionalised elite to give it mediated legitimacy, must find virtual refuge in the frontier of cyberspace. But while the Internet seems able to facilitate more democratic and transnational interpretations of news events, the findings also confirm the importance of the nation, albeit a reconfigured nation, in interpreting global news events.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that the online discourses of the Chinese nation differ from the elite discourses of the Chinese nation found in mediated discourse. It also shows that whereas mediated discourses tend to be elite discourses privileged by territorially bounded institutions, often with formal political power, online discourses of national identity in China tend to be transnational or transborder, based on subaltern discourses that were once suppressed. This suggests that the Internet is able to provide a forum for alternative, subaltern discourses of identity that may challenge the hegemony of elite discourses and offer different interpretations of global events. Further work that builds on these findings includes participant observations in order to uncover the informal and intangible institutions that have been so effective at enforcing online hegemony as well as the extra-textual aspects of national identity, such as ritual that may be vital in giving life to the textual discourses found in this study. Finally, while the scope of this current study includes Hong Kong and mainland China, by expanding this study to cover the online and offline forums of the global Chinese diaspora, who I have found have also adopted a similar discourse of Chinese civilisation, we may be able to take our first glimpse of a the Internet's potential to bring to life an Internet-driven transnational China – a form of identity that is truly signifies the coming of age of the (Scholte, 2000) post-spatial era.

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Appendix – Keywords Used in Sampling Hong Kong Online Discourse

911	? ?	? ?
? ?	? ?	america
? ?	? ?	US
? ?	?	USA
?	? ?	afghanistan
? ? ?	? ?	war
? ?	?	WTC
		World

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