

JIANG, Y. (2012). *Cyber-Nationalism in China: Challenging Western Media Portrayals of Internet censorship in China*. Adelaide: The University of Adelaide Press.

Ying Jiang's *Cyber-Nationalism in China: Challenging Western Media Portrayals Of Internet Censorship in China* discusses the utilisation of the internet in China by individuals whose blog posts can be understood as oppositional to the relative dominance of Western media representations of China. In the book, various strategies used by bloggers on the Chinese blogosphere to express their political convictions are objectively portrayed, allowing the reader to draw their own normative conclusions. The book contains three parts, with seven chapters in total.

Part I is entitled "Democratic Differences between China and the West." It consists of Chapter One: "Introduction" and Chapter Two: "Consumer Liberalism." Chapter One presents a fundamental problematic of the author's text: the dichotomy of the "tense binary opposition of control versus liberalization" (Jiang, 2012, p. 8) with regards to the question of internet regulation and agency in China. Ying Jiang holds that "although the Internet has been a democratic tool in other political settings, it can also be a tool for the containment of democracy" (p. 8). Hence, Ying Jiang partly negotiates this binary opposition with the notion of "governmentality."

The notion of governmentality implies self-government or self-management on the part of individuals within a population, as distinguished from "control" in a more simplistically linear and top-down sense. Ying Jiang suggests that "desires for political change, such as they are, are implicitly embedded in the relationship between China's online communities and state apparatus" (p.4), but that in addition, "the latter claims total governance over the Internet in

the name of the people” (p. 4). The author anticipates a possible objection of the possible Eurocentricity of the concept of governmentality, and emphasises the importance of the notion in the context of China and other “non-liberal countries” (p. 16). Ying Jiang feels that “the gulf between liberal forms of governmentality and China is more apparent than real.” (p. 17).

I myself would be tempted, in some other conceivable research context, to wonder if one could go further, by suggesting that governmentality is a notion abstract enough for application in historical studies of ancient societies as well. But either way, Ying Jiang’s suggestion that governmentality is a useful tool in a modern Chinese context does not appear implausible to me. And there is nothing in her monograph that would lead me to seriously doubt the relevance of governmentality to the topic of cyber-nationalism in China.

Chapter Two explains how Chinese people use the internet for various functions; and how the use of the internet can be related to an “interest in buying and personal pleasure” (p. 21). This same interest in buying and personal pleasure has been represented “ideologically,” i.e. in terms of official Party ideology, in terms of “consumerism as economic individualism” (p.21). For example, while the Chinese blogosphere is full of satire, this appears largely intended for entertainment purposes, rather than directly challenging the given order of governance. Ying Jiang contextualises such satire within “individualist” and “consumerist” tendencies, insofar as she suggests that such individualist and consumerist tendencies have not lead to dissent becoming a large part of the blogosphere.

Hence, the author’s quantitative analysis of blog posts presents the four most common blog styles.

1. “Emotion [emo] blogs.” This is “writing blogs to record one’s emotions” (p. 29).
2. “Net star blogs.” These are “up-to-the-minute, trendy netizens” (p. 29) who have “gained nationwide attention and fame through their daring, bold actions” (p. 29). By the latter phrase Ying Jiang means behaving in unconventional manners online. She cites four examples, such as “February Girl,” who “was brave enough to expose her body shape on her blog” (p. 29).
3. “Celebrity blogs.” “By blogging, celebrities cannot but attract their loyal fans and the media’s attention. Blogs, therefore, have become the main source of entertainment news” (p. 30).

4. “Beauty blogs.” Some of these blogs are centred around individuals, while there are also “more generic categories such as ‘natural beauty,’ ‘bus beauty,’ and ‘fashion beauty.’”

Ying Jiang acknowledges that these are not fully discrete categories. But in relation to the matter of “consumerism,” the author suggests that the four most popular blog styles are relatively de-politicised styles; to wit, styles of blogging that do not function to deny the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Indeed, explicitly political blogs are relatively few in number; while “...blogs with sensitive materials are mainly pro-China and adopt a nationalistic tone” (p. 37). And Chinese bloggers often self-regulate.

Reading this chapter leads me to wonder whether apparently “apolitical” blogs might be hiding some covert “political” ideas. Although, this question, quite understandably, is far beyond the scope of Ying Jiang’s text, other scholars might wish to examine whether “esoteric,” to wit, “indirect” protest might be a significant feature in apparently apolitical blogs. This could, in turn, be compared and contrasted with “implicit” criticisms of political and social norms, ideologies and orders that may be found in other formats, e.g. poetry and historical record, in 20th century China (and even before then).

Part II is called “Analysing Chinese Anger.” It contains Chapter Three: “Anger as a Display of Nationalism;” Chapter Four: “Chinese Anger at the Label of Censorship;” and Chapter Five: “Chinese Anger with Western Media’s Assumptions of Political Change”. Ying Jiang holds that a key driver of Chinese cyber-nationalism is anger. Chapter Three begins with the suggestion that some Chinese bloggers are accepting of Western consumer products, but ill disposed towards “Western political ideology” (p. 47).

And the author suggests that modern Chinese nationalism is by no means a new phenomenon, but its combination with consumerism is a recent development. She suggests that Chinese nationalism does not purely result from top-down indoctrination, as some Westerners claim: nor only from bottom-up spontaneous sentiments, as some Chinese claim. This perspective resembles the view expressed in the monograph on cyber-nationalism by Xu Wu, which says: “Chinese cyber nationalism is a non-government sponsored ideology and movement... a natural extension from China’s century-long nationalist movement, but... different from both the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) official version of patriotism, and the Chinese nationalism movement.” (Xu Wu, 2007, p. 155). And although Ying Jiang’s monograph does not explicitly appeal to Xu Wu, her argument resembles the view expressed in the quotation just cited. That is: Ying Jiang moves beyond merely alluding to the general

notion of “top-down versus bottom-up,” by discussing one specific factor which is irreducible either to top-down nationalism and grassroots nationalism. The factor in question is “consumerism.”

But how might consumerism challenge this problematic of “top-down” and “bottom-up?” The answer appears to lie in Ying Jiang’s suggestion that consumerism affects the rise in nationalism; for example, by directing Chinese attention towards Chinese cultural products. The author stated earlier in the book that Chinese internet users are now “self-managing consumers who experience a degree of independence which, at the same time, legitimates and stabilizes the existing political framework” (Jiang, 2012, p. 22). This association between consumerism and nationalism leads me to raise a further question, apparently impossible to treat within the compass of the monograph: could increased fascination with the West and increased distrust or hostility be simultaneously contradictory *and* mutually reinforcing tendencies?

Chapter Four takes a different angle on Chinese anger in cybernationalist blogging. Ying Jiang suggests that even though “the common theoretical position in the West sees all forms of censorship as limiting freedom of speech” (p. 63), yet “the majority of present-day Chinese people tend to be satisfied with the existing more relaxed, though still limited, freedom of expression” (p. 63). Although what Ying Jiang says is very plausible in itself, it strikes me more as an intuitive inference than a statistical observation (as this observation is not immediately accompanied by any statistical survey).

Ying Jiang provides an intriguing typology of State censorship and self-censorship in the Chinese media and blogosphere. On the horizontal axis, one finds “Censorship, Technologies, Example,” with the category of “Technologies” further divided into “Power/Self/CP” (p. 70). The subcategory of CP means “Contact points between technologies of power and self” (p. 70). And on the vertical axis, one finds: “Defensive, Offensive, Structural, Deliberate, Direct, Subtle, Self-Censorship.” This schema appears to me to be unobjectionable. And I suggest that future studies, in addition, could draw some benefit from an examination of the conditions under which such factors and criteria mutually reinforce and/or mutually inhibit each other in terms of the tendency towards effective censorship. And the question of what the “efficacy” of censorship might mean (as I call it here) is also contestable, as well as (I believe) context-dependent.

Chapter Five, as the chapter title says, discusses “Chinese Anger with Western Media’s Assumptions of Political Change.” The review by Hassid (2013, p. 937) suggests that “Jiang

follows the insights of Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter in arguing that liberalization... does not necessarily lead to democracy. Liberalization, rather, represents the loosening of strictures that allow contemporary Chinese a measure of personal freedom." Appealing to O'Donnell and Schmitter, Ying Jiang suggests that consistent replication of certain acts would be required, if China were to move from "the early stages of liberalization" (Jiang, 2012, p. 93) which "are fraught by their dependence upon government approval, which is likely to be unreliable and inconsistent." (p. 93). Given that "Chinese bloggers have perceived... criticism" (i.e. criticism of China's human rights record) in terms of "an attack on China's reputation" (p. 95), Ying Jiang speaks of "democracy" as a "distant prospect" in China (Ying Jiang p. 94).

Part III (Chapters Six to Seven), "Stabilizing China's Polity," contains Chapter Six: "Nationalism as a Consumer-Oriented Product" and Chapter Seven: "The Current Political Framework in China." Chapter Six commences with a case study of a Chinese website and an associated pop-song on the same theme. As a reaction to the controversial representation of China CCN coverage, many men and women posted photos of themselves making a "letter C" gesture, in order to mock the media outlet. The author (p.106-108) constructs an interesting typology of four kinds of media representations that some Chinese bloggers considered to be biased: "politicizing events," "negative news," "misleading news" and "one-sided news" (p.106). Bloggers also argued for three forms of bias: the Western media reporting news that the Chinese media didn't; the Western media reporting events that the Chinese media also reported, but in a biased manner; the Western media not reporting positive Chinese news.

This is reasonable. However, as with my discussion of Ying Jiang's schema of forms of censorship (in Chapter Four), I would suggest that investigations of the relationships between all four kinds of criticisms, as expressed in cyber-nationalist blog posts, could be even more interesting. Admittedly, it was surely not necessary, in a book the length of the one under review, to enter into such complex conceptual discussion. But it might be a promising point of departure for future investigation.

Part III concludes (p.111) by situating the people Ying Jiang calls China's "Generation Y" within a problematic of both "change" *and* "consolidation". The author concludes that while personal liberties have increased in China, political liberties remain within certain boundaries. Feelings of loyalty and love for China run high, and a degree of appreciation for some aspects of Western culture have, on the whole, not resulted in an indiscriminately positive attitude towards the West.

Thus, according to the author, most “Generation Y” Chinese do not want a Westernised form of democracy; are often conciliatory towards Chinese forms of censorship, rather than bitter or hostile; and consumerism is promoted by the government, but ambivalently.

Evaluation of the Monograph and Possible Directions for Future Study

I believe, in general, that the book reviewed here contains a sufficient array of empirical content and reflections. It is not of exceptional length, but I am sure that it is adequately long for a serious monograph length discussion of cyber-nationalism. The author’s writing style is both concise and clear. The coverage of topics such as consumerism and nationalism ensure that the text is of intrinsic interest for Area Studies scholars, but also potentially relevant for comparative study in other disciplines.

Ultimately, *Cyber-Nationalism in China* aids in explaining how freedom of expression is exercised, constrained and negotiated in China. The author avoids polemicizing, thus maintaining adequate focus on the book’s key sociological concerns. However, as a review of her book by Hassid (2013, p. 937) notes, Ying Jiang risks straying into a degree of empirically questionable assertion regarding what the book calls China’s “Generation Y” and their views on Western-style democracy. Hassid expresses constructive scepticism regarding the representativity of the evidence Ying Jiang marshals in support of her thesis that China’s “Generation Y” are not particularly favourable towards a more “Western” form of democracy. But in fairness, a stronger and more rigorous focus on such questions of representativity might perhaps have required a much longer research project than the book under review here. However, in future, any scholars working on the subject of cyber-nationalism might wish to consider an even longer study which could place a particularly strong emphasis on the imperative of generalisability.

As a final consideration, I wonder if future studies on this topic might wish to consider the question of whether a certain proportion of cyber-nationalism may be driven, at least partly, by a sense of “public face” that, at times of conflicts, sparks a temporary transcendence of ambivalent everyday feelings about the political order in China.

That is: how much is cyber-nationalism is part of a largely coherent and consistent patriotic and pro-Party sentiment and how much of it is, on the contrary, a reaction by otherwise conflicted and divided individuals to the behaviours of (or sometimes perceptions of

the behaviours of) Western parties? Is cyber-nationalism often a reflection of the usual, consistently held opinions of some Chinese individuals? Or is it generally a recurring “crisis” response, where a normal lack of certainty or sense of divided loyalties, and so on, can be transcended by a call to action? This is potentially a very intriguing question for further investigation. It could also further aid in continuing the brief contextualisation I have given above of Ying Jiang’s text in the light of the monograph by Xu Wu as I believe that arguments from both authors are relevant to the aforementioned top-down/bottom-up question.

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