

China's Digital Nationalism and the Hong Kong Protests

An Interview with Florian Schneider

by *Emilie Frenkiel*

Nationalist discourses take the lion share of politics-related discussions on the Chinese Internet. In the context of intense struggles over the interpretation of the Hong Kong protests, this interview with Florian Schneider sheds light on the complexity of online political and identity expression in China and elsewhere.

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Books & Ideas: At the beginning of your book *China's Digital Nationalism*, you wonder what happens when nationalism goes digital: how do you define digital nationalism?

FS: To me, digital nationalism describes a process in which algorithms reproduce and enforce the kind of biases that lead people to view the nation as a major element of their personal identity and as the primary locus of political action. The biases themselves are much older

than digital technology. We can find them in all sorts of mass media, which frequently circulate the symbols of nationalism to their audiences. Digital nationalism is special in that these existing biases are further strengthened and made to seem natural by virtue of the pervasive personalisation processes, preference filters, and group bubbles that have come to define communication on the commercial internet.

How does it materialize in China? Where and how is it expressed? How representative are Chinese *fenqing*, *xiaofenhong*¹ and other young nationalists?

FS: Digital nationalism is expressed in online forums, comment sections, microblogging platforms, and chat apps. It manifests in the way that search engines promote content that privileges a national viewpoint. It manifests in the social media feeds that reproduce national biases by showing nationalist content that fits someone’s personal preference. Whenever people reproduce the signifiers of their nation online, whenever they contribute to digital discourses on the nation, we are witnessing expressions of digital nationalism. The problem is that these expressions are first and foremost performative. We don’t know what people actually think, we can only see what they do in public online forums. A nationalist expression might be an indication of a strongly held belief, or of internalised categories like ‘us’ vs ‘them’. Or it might be a convenient shorthand or an expedient means to frame some discontent or concern that isn’t related to the nation at all. It might be an expression of momentary frustration or enthusiasm that never translates into a meaningful action or support for any particular institution or policy. This is why I am very sceptical about associating specific demographics with digital nationalism wholesale. For a long time, scholars assumed that popular nationalism was prevalent among angry young men, but survey research by people like Alastair Iain Johnston now suggests that this might not be true: young people in China are apparently less nationalists than middle-aged and older folks. Similarly, it is highly questionable whether there is now a group of young women, the ‘little pinks’, who are strongly nationalist: as my colleagues Fang Kecheng and Maria Repnikova have shown two years back,² the web forum that was home to these female users was hijacked by male nationalists, leading the misrepresentation of these women. I’d be careful drawing up actual groups and affiliations based on an imagined community like the ‘nation’. We should look at who claims patriotic credentials for themselves, and on whose behalf they then profess to speak.

What is the impact of the Internet and social media on the expression of nationalism in China? How does digital nationalism interact with offline nationalism?

FS: The internet has helped naturalise and normalise certain categories for making sense of politics. It is increasingly difficult to encounter arguments about politics on China’s internet that do not fall back, in one way or another, on categories associated with the nation. These

¹ So called “angry youth” and “little pinks” are young nationalists expressing and mobilizing online and offline in China over the last decade.

² Maria Repnikova & Kecheng Fang (2018) Authoritarian Participatory Persuasion 2.0: Netizens as Thought Work Collaborators in China, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 27:113

concepts hover in the background at every turn, and since they seem like natural entities that truly describe things in the real world, they become go-to categories when online discussion becomes more heated, for instance in the face of a trade-war or demonstrations in a neighbouring territory. Nationalism has become the default. This phenomenon is not new, and it is not limited to China: Michael Billig has famously described nationalism as increasingly ‘banal’,³ since people have these seemingly trivial referents at their disposal that all point to a national community, and most days the use of those referents does not lead to any meaningful political action: people wave flags, share vapid nationalist slogans, use phrases like ‘our country’ uncritically, and so on. It goes almost unnoticed that people ‘flag’ the nation in this way, on a continuous basis. But when things heat up, then all this ‘flagging’ suddenly provides an actionable context that can be exploited. This is then also a context in which activists, media workers, politicians, military personnel, and anyone else must position themselves and their activities. In this way, the parameters of nationalist discourse come to guide public behaviour and create strong constraints for political action.

Can digital nationalism be simply considered as masterminded and beneficial to the Party leadership? Are nationalists passive recipients of successive campaigns to build pride and cohesion of the Chinese nation? Who else benefits from digital nationalism?

FS : It would be too simple to see Chinese nationalism as purely orchestrated by the authorities. Granted, nationalism is driven by elite activities, and this prominently includes the Chinese Communist Party and the PRC state, who place a strong emphasis on nationalism in their propaganda and their ‘patriotic education’ campaigns. That said, the supporters of popular nationalism are not passive recipients. People are generally active users of culture, and that is certainly true in China as well. It might be more helpful to view nationalists in a similar way as other groups of people who construct a sense of community for themselves and those with whom they associate. Just think of sports fans, or members of religious groups, or professional groups. These people often don’t know each other, but they assume that they have strong connections, based on ostensibly similar values, cultural tropes, or life experiences. We all make such communities part of who we are. We may use pre-designed cultural elements in the process, for instance the referents that are handed down by a church elite, or the PR team of a celebrity, or some similar group of actors, but we re-work those resources in the service of our own identity projects. Just think of what happens when fans of cultural products like Game of Thrones or StarWars get upset because a Hollywood studio isn’t doing their beloved franchise justice. The difference is that when it comes to nationalists, their cultural product generates not just a sense of ‘community’, it also ties that community to a place (the national territory) and it insists that this place should be governed by an autonomous set of institutions (the nation-state). That means that where fans of cultural franchises get upset when the characters or storylines in those products aren’t used ‘correctly’, nationalists get deeply disturbed when anyone or anything unsettles the status-quo of the national territory and its sovereignty. That can be a very dangerous situation, and it is at the heart of how groups are now clashing over the status of Hong Kong. But it is important to remember that the way nationalists rework the symbols of their nation to create meaning for

³ Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, Sage, 1995.

themselves is not that different from how groups everywhere use cultural resources: in the end, the resulting associations and sentiments are not under any single actor's control, even when elites delude themselves otherwise.

At the beginning of Xi Jinping's first mandate, nationalist discussions—even though nationalism has been defined as the “primary online discourse” by Breslin and Shen—were said to be heavily censored. Have you been able to verify this, if so, why did that happen?

F.S.: Online nationalism is a mixed-blessing for the authorities. It can be a powerful lever that helps mobilise support, but at the same time it can move beyond the control of the authorities and threaten their legitimacy. For instance, while nationalists in China might support a strong government position against a perceived antagonist like Japan or the US, they are less likely to forgive China's rulers if they collaborate with those supposed 'enemies'. The authorities consequently try to 'guide public opinion' in ways that emphasises nationalism in contexts where an angry public generates support, and they downplay the nationalist angle whenever more cosmopolitan, cooperative politics are on the table. To some extent, this approach is successful, mainly because the party has such extensive control over online discourses through its vast propaganda and censorship apparatus. However, it does not have absolute control. It is always possible for a nationalist issue to emerge online and spark widespread discontent before the censors can shut down discussion, and so the threat of nationalist discontent always looms in the background, ready to ignite. This is why the CCP's continuous reliance on nationalism to fuel its legitimacy is so worrying: the authorities keep signalling to citizens that nationalist categories provide a morally sanctioned framework for making sense of politics, and as long as they keep stoking that fire, it will remain a major force in heating up discussions and preventing meaningful exchanges of opinion.

Does it have any impact on actual policy? Is its focus on China's margins (Hong Kong, Taiwan, Xinjiang, Tibet) a recent development?

F.S.: Chinese nationalism has a long history that dates back to the 19th century, but the more recent kind of popular nationalism really dates back to the 1980s, and especially the 1990s, when the PRC government used nationalism as the default framework for cementing public support for its one-party rule in the wake of the Tiananmen Massacre. Ever since, the promise of overcoming the 'century of national humiliation' at the hand of foreign imperialist and colonialist forces has been a rallying cry for the authorities. The 'national humiliation' consisted in no small part of a loss of territories, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and especially Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan remained blemishes on the nation's reputation, as understood by the CCP. Reunifying these places with the mainland has been a crucial part of how the party justifies its mandate to rule. In that sense, the concerns over territories like Hong Kong or Taiwan is not that new, though nationalists in China have more recently developed a sense that the PRC now has the capacity to act on those concerns, whereas previously it did not. This has created much louder rhetoric and more hawkish demands. Those demands then interact with perceptions elsewhere, for instance in Hong Kong and Taiwan, where they facilitate long-standing anxieties about the PRC government and nationalist sentiments of their own, and this leads to political choices that again irk mainland

nationalists, and on and on it goes. It's a vicious cycle that escalates nationalist dynamics in the region.

Do you see a convergence between digital nationalism in Mainland China and Hong Kong, Taiwan, and nationalism in other Asian countries? Or in the rest of the world?

F.S.: The mechanics of digital nationalism are visible pretty much around the world. That is because nationalism appeals to people at a basic psychological level: it promises comfort, safety, and certainty in an increasingly complex world. Ironically, that sense of comfort is also at the heart of how and why people share much of the information that circulates on social media today. We want to be part of that 'friends' circle, and we want to share information with like-minded people in our communities. In that sense, digital nationalism sits on top of seemingly intuitive digital interfaces and designs, which in turn sit on top of our basic human psychology. In a world where nations and nation-states are the default actors in politics, nationalism also remains the default ideology for making sense of those politics. The mechanisms of advanced digital communication technologies amplify those defaults. Wherever people use social media platforms and news aggregators like Facebook or Twitter, and wherever users turn to domestic versions of search engines like Google, they are bound to be exposed to the algorithmic dynamics that perpetuate digital nationalism and that push users into nationalist scripts. Much of the return to nationalism that we have recently witnessed in Europe and North America is in part caused this way. Trump and his rhetoric of making America great again is enabled by digital nationalism as much as the Brexit in the UK or the various anti-Islam movements in continental Europe. In East Asia, the continuous reliance on nationalist frameworks by governments in China, Japan, and Korea provide grist for the mills of popular nationalists and their online discourses. And the protests in Hong Kong would be difficult to fully understand without an appreciation of how localist concerns in the city are increasingly turning into a nationalism of their own. Studying the Chinese example is instructive because it spells out what happens when biased algorithms, which are not open to public scrutiny, meet long-term attempts to instil patriotism through education and propaganda, all within a hyper-capitalist national environment that is interested in profiting from 'likes' and 'clicks' and 'shares'. China is certainly not unique, in any meaningful way, but it spells one possible future digital society, and we'd be well-advised to pay close attention to what that society is shaping up to be.

Have you had the opportunity to observe ongoing reactions to the Hong Kong protests on the Chinese web? What's your analysis?

F.S.: The discussions about the Hong Kong protests on Chinese social media platforms like Sina Weibo⁴ are deeply disturbing examples of digital nationalism. By deploying familiar categories like 'territorial integrity' and 'traitors', nationalist commentators have taken hold of the discussion in ways that make it almost impossible to deviate from nationalist scripts. The aggressive tone of the discussion is already intimidating, but the fact that online users have gone on to 'dox' offenders of the nationalist mainstream narrative and promote online vigilantism against perceived 'traitors' has only further contributed to a very narrow

⁴ China's Twitter.

discursive space. In all of this, the official media has repeatedly sanctioned the aggressive tone, and it has in many instances contributed to it. The official state broadcaster Chinese Central Television (CCTV) frames the Hong Kong protesters as terrorists and even as fascists, creating spurious analogies with Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, and this creates a strong sense of antagonism that is not only offensive but also unhelpful for coming to terms with the complexities in Hong Kong.

How do you interpret the struggle between pro-Hong Kong protesters vs. pro-China (pro-Hong Kong police) currently taking place on foreign campuses? What does it tell us of the nationalist feelings harboured by Chinese students when abroad? How about the wider international Chinese community?

F.S.: This is a complicated issue, and we should be careful not to generalise. There are so many overseas Chinese students, studying in diverse contexts, that it wouldn't make sense to lump them all together and assume they share a singular nationalist agenda. Admittedly, we've seen aggressive behaviour aimed at pro-HK protesters in places like Australia and North America. There are bound to be many overseas students who believe in their versions of popular nationalism and who are offended by the ways in which liberal societies showcase support for what they see as a separatist movement. However, there are plenty of Chinese students abroad who have more nuanced understandings, even if they must increasingly keep those understandings to themselves if they don't want to risk repercussions at home. Meanwhile, we should also acknowledge that the aggressive nationalism on display among some Chinese student groups in, for instance, Australia is facilitated by the experience that those students have in their chosen place of study. Anti-Chinese sentiments have been severe in Australia and North America, to the point of being blatantly racist, and the UK and Europe are similarly starting to exhibit signs of worrying anti-Chinese sentiments that generalise about visitors from China and that risk marginalising the students who go abroad to study. Now, I emphatically do not want to excuse the kind of aggressive Chinese nationalist behaviour that is now well-documented on video-sharing sites, but I would welcome a discussion that acknowledges how such behaviour is grounded in anxieties and resentments that can be the product of toxic nationalisms elsewhere.

What's your angle on Twitter and Facebook's revelations on Chinese state media advertising Beijing's narrative on the HK protests?

F.S.: This is not surprising. The CCP and the Chinese state have long been extending their attempts to 'guide public opinion' to contexts abroad, and this has included more than just public diplomacy and official media campaigns. The CCP has experience spreading rumours and conspiracy theories in domestic contexts to discredit unwelcome political ideas or rally support for its own position, and it now uses these tactics to seed discontent and uncertainty abroad. The goal seems to be to create discourses and sentiments that appeal to middle-class anxieties, especially concerns about chaos, instability, and violence. By suggesting that the struggles in Hong Kong are causing harm to a supposedly 'silent majority' of Hong Kong citizens, these influence campaigns try to strengthen conservatives while creating doubt about the activities of the protesters. It is an open question whether such a strategy can be successful: it relies on a law-and-order discourse that is bound to appeal only to those who are

already convinced, but it will likely seem tone-deaf to liberal sensibilities in Europe, North America, and East Asian societies like Taiwan, where the protesters have garnered much good will with their own discourses about peaceful civil disobedience and a quest for liberty.

What is your current research on?

F.S.: I've just finished a new book which looks at large-scale staged events in China as sites of political meaning-making, especially the large events of the Hu Jintao era: the Beijing Olympics, Shanghai Expo, and so on. It'll be out in October, with Leiden University Press. I am also expanding my work on digital nationalism by looking at content on WeChat: my colleague Titus Chen and I are trying to find out how public opinion management works on that chat-app, using intriguing data that Titus has been able to mine. In the meantime, I'm working on a textbook that will teach students how to conduct political communication and media analyses in East Asian contexts, so in the Chinese speaking world, but also in Japan or Korea. Finally, as my next big project, I plan to study the relevance of online rumours in East Asian societies, so that's a topic that connects neatly with my interest in digital politics.