The Entanglement of Signs—Examining the Political Turn of Internet Memes in China

Xiaomeng Li, Ohio University, United States

Abstract

Memes in China are quite popular in recent years thanks to the high penetration of the Internet and usage of mobile phones. Previous studies on Chinese Internet memes mainly go into two directions, one is from a political perspective that addresses how memes reflect the tension between the Chinese party-state and civil society. The other direction is quite apolitical, which focuses on the playfulness of the Internet environment and youth culture. However, this paper proposes an "entanglement" between the apolitical and political memes and argues that under certain circumstances, apolitical memes could take on political significance and even strengthen the Chinese state's ruling power and hegemony. Thus, this paper applies a social semiotic analysis to examine the "China-Taiwan memes war" on Facebook in January 2016 to further observe the key contexts and circumstances that foster the entanglement of signs and meanings. The findings demonstrate that: 1) this entanglement should give credit to the popular culture and entertainment industry which often serve as a safe hub for mild political expression and circumvent the political surveillance; 2) only when the ideas expressed in the memes are not challenging but supporting the authority's ideology can they participate in the construction of nationalism; 3) when traditional cultural signs are reinforced with the help of popular culture (memes), consent is easily achieved and hails the netizens to re-imagine nationalism, which again, makes the Chinese party-state the ultimate beneficiary of this celebratory online culture.

Keywords: memes, memes package, China, entanglement, China-Taiwan memes war

Introduction

One of the liveliest scenes on Chinese Internet today is the "memes packages" (*biao qing bao*). "Memes packages" are collections of funny images with simple captions on them that Chinese Internet users create and share online. Memes packages are similar to the Western "image macros" such as the "Y U No guy" and "grumpy cat," but are distinct in several ways: first, the sources are not limited to stock photos. Instead, any image with a caption can become an addition to the memes packages. Second, memes packages update quickly and stay up-to-date since netizens like to use the latest, most trending images and modify them into memes. Third, memes packages are used as tools to enrich and even replace textual and verbal communication. They can also act as "weapons" in online arguments and form a visual conversation that may be more peaceful and polite.

Figure 1: Examples of "memes packages" on China's Internet.

Many studies on memes in China tend to explore from a political perspective that specifically addresses how memes reflect the tension between the Chinese party-state and civil society. Meanwhile, there is another trend to look at memes from an apolitical perspective by focusing on the playfulness of the Chinese Internet environment and youth culture. While it is obvious that these two could overlap and intertwine at times, not many studies have extensively analyzed how and under what circumstances such transitions happen. Therefore, this paper proposes the idea of *entanglement* to examine the relationship between apolitical and political memes in China's "memes packages." It argues that there is no clear-cut point that defines when an apolitical meme becomes political or vice versa because in certain social, cultural, and critical contexts, the creation and circulation of memes can be fluid, unstable, and arbitrary.

The Traits of Memes in the Age of Hyperreal

Barthes (1977) proposed "the death of the author" by claiming that when a work was finished, it was up to the readers to interpret it. He rejected the notion of a stable author identity and stated, "once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile" (p. 147). Baudrillard (1981), following Barthes, defined the postmodern era as "a generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (p.1). In the age of hyperreal, the meaning of images is detached from its original relation to the world because the real and unreal are blurred. People are living in "simulacrum": a society of symbols and signs in which representation and reality become difficult to distinguish. Within a simulacrum, originality is being represented by endless copies.

Memes are perfect examples of the society's decentralized creation of cultural products in a postmodern hyperreality. The term *meme* was first coined by biologist Richard Dawkins in 1976 when he was trying to "convey the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*" (Dawkins, 2006, p. 192). He also offered some examples of memes being "tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches," which contained cultural references as well (p. 192). Shifman (2013) explained that, "'Internet meme' is commonly applied to describe the propagation of content items such as jokes, rumors, videos, or websites from one person to others via the Internet (p. 362). Thus, there is no originality for memes because the raw materials are scattered, ready-made, and could easily evolve into another meme. Today, Internet memes are ubiquitous and contain a great deal of cultural significance that can even overcome national barriers.

Political Memes vs. Apolitical Memes

Memes can come in the forms of videos, images, or texts; what they have in common is that they can easily trigger people to react and respond, and sometimes even inspire people to act in an offline space. Studies on the political role of Chinese memes tend to focus on how memes reflect the tension between the Chinese party-state and civil society. They usually address that Internet users create secret codes and local languages to circumvent the state's surveillance. Yu (2015) stressed the "Postsocialist condition" in contemporary China and how popular culture found its way to exert political influence. Focusing on the online parody films, Yu explained the concept of "e'gao," which was a form of memes that went from purely cultural to a political direction in China. According to him, "e'gao films are multimedia parodies or satires that employ different forms of expression, such as wordplay and digital manipulation of audio-visual and photographic elements… The e'gao phenomenon is inseparable from China's postsocialist technological, sociocultural, and media conditions" (p. 55).

Mina (2014) defined some Chinese memes that tackled political issues as "social change memes," which "express a sentiment for changing a social or political issues" (p. 362). What differentiates social change memes from others is that they do not directly target authority or challenge the current regime; instead, they are usually an online "symbolic action," as Mina explained, that "can be powerful in the context of

an authoritarian state like China, which exerts control over all broadcast and internet media" (p. 362). The most famous social change memes in China during the past decade were unarguably the "Grass Mud Horse" and "River Crab," which have been studied by many scholars. Grass Mud Horse (*cao ni ma*) sounds like a profane phrase of women's genitals in Chinese, but literally means a llama or alpaca. River Crab (*he xie*), on the other hand, sounds similar to the Chinese word for "harmony." These two "sacred animals," as called by the Chinese netizens back then, became a rebellious response to the government's promotion of a "Harmonious Society (*he xie she hui*)" under the former President Hu Jintao's administration.

Meanwhile, some scholars suggested abandoning a purely political approach to study memes. Szablewicz (2014) claimed that Chinese youths nowadays were apolitical. She stated that, "while some see the meme as a relevant form of political critique, others dismiss it as indicative of a psychological malaise affecting contemporary youth" (p. 259-260). In addition, China's softened power and ideological control of the society have gained effectiveness by directing the public's focus from looking for loopholes in the authority to enjoying the achievements of the economy. As Wang (2012) pinpointed, the "general satisfaction with the regime's economic rise easily overwhelms the great desire for democracy" (para. 34).

Moreover, Yu (2015) studied a few popular bloggers in China and found that the economic gains from producing memes or even "being the memes" clearly outweighed the risks an activist undertook by creating political memes (p. 60). For example, some bloggers' images and writings have been advertised on T-shirts and books; some have even become the spokespersons for famous brands.

The *Entanglement*: Redefine "Political"

However, political and apolitical memes are never two parallel entities. They could overlap, intertwine, and sometimes transform to each other. Therefore, this paper proposes the word *entanglement* to describe the relationship between political and apolitical memes as it is quite impossible to separate the two when studying today's memes packages in China. Unlike the Western cyberspace where popular cultural products like memes have a quite unrestrained space to grow, the development of popular culture in China is constantly under the party-state's scrutiny, thus memes can take on more dynamic roles in response to the government's ideological control and regulation of the Internet and discourses.

Howley (2016) pointed out that the burgeoning memes culture illustrates "the increasingly intimate and dynamic relationship between popular culture and political engagement" and thus he positioned memes at "the intersection of popular culture and geopolitics in digital space" (p. 156). Meanwhile, under the contemporary Chinese context, Szablewicz (2014) called for a redefinition of "political" by stressing that "the Chinese Internet is a place where contentious activity through play flourishes" (p. 262). To her, Chinese youths were dealing with a lot of pressure and frustration from the competitive market in the post-socialist, neoliberal Chinese society (p. 260), and thus she suggested scholars to shift away from the prevailing "Tiananmen Square"

political approach, i.e. the confrontational and violent authoritarianism, and look at "the political possibilities inherent in everyday uses of the Internet" (p. 262). Her research was on "diaosi," which means loser, a self-deprecating word that many young people in China call themselves. With words like "diaosi," Szablewicz indicated that the presentation of identity through apolitical memes could become politicized "as bringing visibility to a group of young people rendered otherwise invisible by a society in which success is often defined by educational achievements and material wealth" (p. 263).

This argument demonstrates an important point that the seemingly apolitical statement made by memes could be an alternative way for political engagement and participation. Besides, memes as an "everyday" creation, with their mundane and approachable traits, could be politicized based on people's particular needs. This kind of transformation is different from the previous "social change memes" such as the Grass Mud Horse and River Crab, because even though those memes also used mundane images and texts to circumvent the government surveillance, they were designed with a clear goal to make a political statement against the government and dominant ideology. However, the *entanglement* discussed in this paper is a more recent phenomenon with the emergence of "memes packages." These initially apolitical memes are turned into political statements without previous planning or agenda setting. They are more spontaneous, flexible, and are not limited to a single goal. Therefore, by proposing the *entanglement* between political and apolitical memes, this paper examines two questions: 1) What contexts could trigger the entanglement between apolitical and political memes? 2) How does the entanglement manifest itself in these contexts?

Method

The questions above require an examination of the larger social context within which creative visual texts and discourses like memes emerge, make sense of, and respond to the surroundings. This study thus applies a *social semiotic analysis* as a foundational framework to help connect the visual language with the cultural and political contexts.

Saussure (1983) stated that the sign was the basic unit of language which consisted of two parts—the signified and signifier. The signified was "a concept or an object," while the signifier was "a sound or an image that is attached to a signified" (Rose, 2016, p. 113). Saussure also claimed that the relationship between signifier and signified was arbitrary (p. 119). However, Kress and van Leeuwen (1996)'s proposal of the "social semiotic theory" argued that instead of looking at the relation between signifier and signified as arbitrary, it was "motivated" and shaped by social constructs and the sign-makers' interests of meaning-making. They explained that, "signs are motivated conjunctions of meaning (signified) and form (signifier) in which the meanings of sign-makers lead to apt, plausible, motivated expressions, in any medium which is to hand" (p. 11). van Leeuwen (2005) also observed that, "in social semiotics the focus changed from the 'sign' to the way people use semiotic 'resources' both to produce communicative artefacts and events and to interpret them—which is also a

form of semiotic production—in the context of specific social situations and practices" (p. xi). Thus, social semiotic analysis does not see signs as alienated subjects of study, but are products of their surrounding contexts and conditions.

In addition, Barthes' (1977) idea of "anchorage" also helps decipher today's memes culture. Anchorage, usually in the form of texts that go along with an image, "helps to identify purely and simply the elements of the scene and the scene itself" (p. 156). It was applied to "every society" within which "various techniques are developed intended to *fix* the floating chain of *signifieds* in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs" (p. 156). In a word, anchorage helps navigate through different meanings and secures a desirable one, thus producing a fixed connection between the signifier and signified.

Semiotic studies tend to examine data selectively. Rose (2016) stated that semiologists "choose their images on the basis of how conceptually interesting they are… Thus semiology very often takes the form of detailed case studies of relatively few images, and the case study stands or falls on its analytical integrity and interest rather than on its applicability to a wide range of material" (p. 110). Therefore, this paper conducts a case study of the "2016 China-Taiwan memes war on Facebook" by analyzing memes that were largely used during the event.

The China-Taiwan Memes War on Facebook

The relationship between China and Taiwan has long been troubled. After the World War II, China's People's Liberation Army led by Mao Zedong and the Kuomingtang (KMT) Party led by Chiang Kai-shek were engaged in a civil war. With the winning of the former, Mao established the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 whereas the KMT retreated to Taiwan and continued to hold power as the Republic of China. The PRC firmly sticks with the "One-China Principle," which claims that "Taiwan is an inalienable part of China" ("One-China Principle"). Taiwan, on the other hand, insists the Republic of China's legitimacy. In recent years, due to economic concerns, more and more trades happen between the two regions and so does the entertainment industry, but the two sides' political stances remain unchanged.

The China-Taiwan memes war on Facebook was triggered by a photo of a young idol Chou Tzu-yu, who held a Korean national flag and a Taiwanese flag to represent her identity as the only Taiwanese in a Korean pop idol group. This photo did not go viral until Huang An, a Taiwanese pro-One China celebrity, posted it with criticism on his Weibo account. Chinese netizens, who had long been educated that "Taiwan is an inseparable part of China," were furious and started to condemn Chou on Weibo. Under the pressure and the possibility of losing commercial opportunities in China's huge market, Chou's company, JYP Entertainment, publicized a video of Chou's apology on January 15, 2016. In the video, the 16-year-old held a script and read the apology from it. She emphasized that, "There is only one China. I am a Chinese." (jypentertainment, 2016). However, the video did not satisfy the Chinese netizens; instead, many accused Chou for not being sincere because she seemed detached in the video and simply read from a script. Meanwhile, people in Taiwan were also

outrageous after seeing the video. They criticized the Mainland netizens for repressing a 16-year-old girl.

Moreover, since this incident happened during the final phase of Taiwan's Presidential Election and Tsai Ing-wen was elected the new President of Taiwan, the Chinese netizens had already been upset about this result as Tsai was known as a pro-independent political leader. Hence, "Li Yi Ba" ("Di Ba") immediately decided to organize an online movement in the form of "memes war," which meant to bombard Taiwanese news media's Facebook pages with Chinese memes packages. The Di Ba is affiliated with Baidu, China's largest search engine that also hosts forums. According to Baidu's wiki, originally built for the Chinese soccer player Li Yi in 2004, this forum developed into one of the most populous online forums with 21 million registered users by February 2016 and a total of 850 million posts ("Li Yi Ba").

On January 20, 2016 at 7 p.m., an army of Chinese Mainland netizens flooded to Facebook and started to post memes under several major Taiwanese news pages including *Apple Daily* and SET News, known as the most vocal news agencies promoting Taiwan independence. In addition, the official Facebook page of Tsai Ing-wen was also filled with memes, making the event almost like an "occupy movement." According to *Wall Street Journal,* by midnight of the movement, "five hours after the online posters began their coordinated effort, the latest posting on Ms. Tsai's official Facebook page had received more than 35,000 comments, most of which were messages indicating that Taiwan is a part of China" (Huang, 2016, para. 7). It also reported that "at least 4,000 Internet users were involved. More than 60% them are members of China's post-1990 generation" (para. 8).

When digging deeper, the memes war showed something more than "fun" because it was extremely well organized by a huge online community within a short period of time, and on a political issue which would normally be sensitive on Chinese Internet. As its mission was to spread the notion that "Taiwan is part of China" in the form of memes, the mundane memes suddenly took on political significance. In a decentralized Internet environment, online movements could easily take place; but under China's sensitive regime that prevents political movements online, it was truly astonishing how such a large-scale movement could successfully "break the Firewall" and quickly make an influence. Thus, by examining the major visual themes emerged from the memes war, this paper presents the following findings to decipher the *entanglement* of apolitical and political signs.

Finding 1: From entertainment to politics—the intertextuality of celebrities' images

The fact that the "memes war" happened in the entertainment realm gave the online movement a relatively safe space away from the political attention. Most memes in this "war" were manipulation of figures in the entertainment industry. The raw materials included screenshots from Chinese and Taiwanese TV dramas, music videos, news reports, etc. Among them, Huang Zitao, a Chinese idol who used to be in a

South Korean idol group and then left to develop his solo career in China, had been used extensively as memes. Many Chinese netizens liked to make fun of his capricious personality and facial expressions. Thus, during the memes war, his previous photos were turned into memes and became the forefront fighters.

Figure 2: "Do you think I'm afraid of you?"
Figure 3: "Do you have some problems here? [pointing at his head]"
Figure 4: "French style mockery"
Figure 5: "You go die."

To interpret Huang's memes as signs, Peirce's "icon" "index" and "symbol" could be used for the primary level of analysis. The original images of Huang taken from his live performance footages, interviews, and music videos are the icons, which "represents the signified by apparently having a likeness to it" (Rose, 2016, p. 119). According to Rose, "In index signs, there is an inherent relationship between the signified and signifier. 'Inherent' is often culturally specific" (p. 120). Huang's facial expressions are indexical signs of an angry and complacent person, which could also be the Chinese netizens' emotion towards the pro-independence Taiwanese people. Moreover, as Huang had always been laughed at by Chinese netizens, his appearance on popular memes package had become a symbolic representation of something that was unfavorable. Once again, although these were just images of a pop idol, they conveyed emotions that were relatively easy to discern for other Internet users and those who were familiar with the Chinese popular culture.

On the other hand, the Huang Zitao memes also demonstrated the "intertextuality" of memes. According to Rose (2016), intertextuality "refers to the way that the meanings of any one discursive image or text depend not only on that one text or image, but also on the meanings carried by other images and texts" (p. 187). Huang's memes created a discursive field that people's understanding of him had already generated fixed interpretations before the memes war. These interpretations were then carried on in this new political context between China and Taiwan. The young netizens who were involved in the memes war could thus quickly pick up the meanings and disseminate the messages.

However, in a different case, the intertextuality was challenged as the memes could signify messages that had no reference to previously existed contexts. This was best demonstrated by another set of popular memes of Tsai Ing-wen. Since she was not from Mainland China's governmental board, it was relatively safe for the Chinese netizens to edit her images. Like Huang, Tsai's images were Photoshoped and became a prevalent icon. However, without texts as "anchorage," the memes would not represent the same "signified" because there was a lack of context.

Figure 6: "I'm silently watching you acting cool."
Figure 7: "I'm confident like that."
Figure 8: "I feel so wronged but I won't say."
Figure 9: "I'm so doomed."

Here, the indexical signs seemed vague. Unlike Huang's images that flamboyantly showed his emotions, Tsai's facial expressions captured in these photos would be harder to interpret without some contextual background. Hence, texts became important tools to anchor the meaning, which would otherwise be unstable. In fact, it was the creators who actively altered the original "signified" to serve their political and ideological purposes, which were to demean the Taiwanese pro-independence leader and make her look immature and silly.

The memes made of cultural and political celebrities showed how Chinese netizens used the new media platform to artfully challenge and test the bottom-line of political expression. Besides, by making memes of people who occupied more political power, social capitals, and cultural capitals, this action itself was a political act that not only confronted the authority but also fostered self-empowerment. Further, as the government stayed away from the controversy that originated from the entertainment industry, Chinese netizens found a way to turn anger into a celebratory culture that walked in between apolitical and political realms.

Finding 2: Ideological consent—the "father-son" discourse

An important reason that the memes war went viral without any interference from the authority, at least during the event, was because it was not anti-government. Instead, the Chinese party-state's ruling ideology was strengthened by the netizens' spontaneous nationalist actions. Gramsci (1996) claimed that for the authority to maintain hegemony, it needed to gain consent from the civil society. To achieve this goal, it exerted power not only through coercive methods such as the army and police, but also educational ways. In the case of the memes war, some major news sites in

China even picked up the event and praised these netizens, thus acted as a non-violent force that encouraged the public to further defend the Chinese ruling power. For example, Sina, one of the largest portal sites in China, commented that, "The significance of the memes war has been underestimated," noting "the seemingly funny and unserious event actually showed the richness of contemporary Mainland Chinese popular culture in contrast to the falling of Taiwan's" ("Taiwanese Internet," 2016). Youth.cn, the mouthpiece of the Communist Youth League of China, defined this event as "Di Ba's Crusade to Facebook." Although Facebook was not supposed to be accessed in China due to the Great Firewall's censorship, this article praised the movement and called it a "patriotic communication" that showed "young people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait's yearning for deeper communication" ("Di Ba's Crusade," 2016).

The major media's support made people realize that this online movement had become a plausible demonstration of nationalism. Thus, a sense of pride emerged. One of the examples showing this surging pride and nationalism was the recurring "father-son" discourse in the memes. Foucault (1970) stated that "in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality" (p. 52). He thought that discourse was constructed through a process of exclusion and hence power was involved. Rose (2016) explained the Foucauldian idea of power by stating that, "Discourse disciplines subjects into certain ways of thinking and acting, but this is not simply repressive; it does not impose rules for thought and behavior on a pre-existing human agent. Instead, human subjects are produced through discourse" (p. 189). In this case, by presenting a "father-son" discourse through memes, Chinese netizens exerted power over the fellow Taiwanese people. This power was not "imposed from the top of society down on to its oppressed bottom layers" (Rose, 2016, p.189), but was omnipresent through the most mundane presentations.

Figure 10: "Wrong number. This is your dad."
Figure 11: "What? Get your head over here and let me show you some father's love."
Figure 12: "How dare you speak to your father like this?"
Figure 13: "It's time to give you some father's love."

The above memes showing a "father-son" discourse did not incorporate any real person in the image; instead, the creators used stock images that appeared often in other apolitical memes and simply edited the texts with an authoritarian tone from a father to a son, which also metaphorically represented the Mainland China's

sovereignty over Taiwan. Here, the literally apolitical filial relationship became an indicative sign, or a metonymic sign (Rose, 2016, p. 121) that represented the dominant power of China over a region that it claims to be his.

Finding 3: Peaceful becomes powerful—the image-driven nationalism through showing-off

The entanglement of apolitical and political memes was also demonstrated through the showing-off of China's cuisines and sceneries. One of the participants named Bala Bala posted a message that could best conclude their intention:

> In order to abridge the distance between the Chinese and Taiwanese netizens, based on the idea of being polite, having evidence, and rejecting dispute, we aim at expressing the Mainland Chinese people's hospitality through showcasing the Chinese cuisines, beautiful sceneries, and enabling Taiwanese friends to appreciate the beauty of the Mainland. All we want to do is to connect with Taiwan and shorten the distance between our hearts. We strongly oppose any form of separatist motions. We hope we could get more approval and involve more people from both sides. Building a great China needs all of our efforts." ("Di Ba crusade," 2016).

This statement was diplomatically written, but in fact contained some irony and sarcasm as it stressed that the Mainland China had the advantage of good cuisines and sceneries that Taiwan did not have. Essentially, these apolitical images of foods and sceneries became cultural products "exported" to Taiwan through Facebook. As the intention was to "enable" the Taiwanese to see the greatness of China, it already indicated a presumed power relationship between the two regions, yet in a peaceful and safe way. Moreover, these images not only targeted the pro-independence Taiwanese, but also re-introduced Chinese culture to the younger generation who were the main force in this memes war and who were often known as indifferent about political issues.

Doherty (2009) stated that, "Nationalism is not a naturally occurring sentiment, but rather needs to be carefully nurtured and sustained in the social imaginary through the production and circulation of unifying narratives that invoke the nation's imagined community" (p. 1). In the case of the memes war, the presentation of the impressive images of China and Chinese culture acted as a reinforcement for the Chinese netizens to re-imagine their nationalism. Also in this way, the traditional culture is celebrated through the form of popular culture, i.e. the memes packages.

Figure 14: "Finish this roasted Peking Duck and then fight."
Figure 15: "If you can noise over me, I will treat you this Rou Jia Mo."

Figure 16: Under an album named "cultural exports," all the pictures have the caption: "Let the Taiwanese pro-independence dogs gain some vision."
Figure 17: Cities of Hangzhou, Harbin, and Dunhuang, each with a seal that says: "For Di Ba anti-Taiwan independence use only."

Conclusion

Billig (1995) proposed "banal nationalism," indicating that nationalism in modern, industrialized nation-states was revealed through the daily representation of familiar images and clichés in people's lives, such as the national flag, anthem, etc. Hence, people's shared recognition of nation is "indicated, or 'flagged', in the lives of its citizenry" (p. 6). Perhaps nothing is more banal than the memes packages on Chinese Internet today, given its appearance, content, and distribution channels. People's extensive usage of memes packages on the Internet and social networks makes it an indispensable part of daily conversation and interactions. As Billig argued, language is "a prime determinant of nationalist identity" and "the creation of a national hegemony often involves a hegemony of language" (p. 29). Indeed, the Gramscian theory of cultural hegemony highlighted the "spontaneous consent" from the masses in response to the dominant power's ruling ideology (Lears, 1985, p. 568). The subordinate group, which in this case the Chinese netizens, reified the power of

cultural hegemony by utilizing memes to spontaneously and collectively promote nationalism without ever being coerced by the authority.

The findings from the China-Taiwan memes war demonstrate that the entanglement of apolitical and political memes on Chinese Internet should first give credit to the blossoming popular culture and entertainment industry, which often serve as a safe hub for mild political expression and could avoid the political surveillance. It is easy to engage and organize people who are already in the popular culture scene to become aware of some political issues, and even hail them into an ideological battlefield which is by no means physical or violent.

In addition, the entanglement of apolitical and political memes was manifested in a variety of ways, including amateur Photoshop of celebrities, play of language, reliance on cultural instead of political imageries, etc. During the memes war, as the younger generation on the Internet were re-introduced to their own culture, they also utilized such cultural signs to re-imagine the Chinese nation and nationalism. The memes' transformation from apolitical to political in this case demonstrated how social media and new media technology helped generate and propagate nationalism without the authority's direct education and intervention.

Consequently, only when the ideas expressed in the memes are not challenging but supporting and reinforcing the authority's power can they participate in the larger agenda of nation-building. As the memes war was exclusively pro-One China, the mainstream media even helped fueling the flame along the way. This kind of support encouraged the Chinese netizens' political participation in the form of peaceful and fun visual communication, which in fact, possessed a clear power relationship. After all, the Chinese party-state was the ultimate beneficiary of this celebratory online nationalist movement.

References

Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* New York: NY: Verso.

Barthes, R. (1977). *Image-Music-Text.* (S. Heath, Trans.). New York, NY: Hill and Wang.

Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and simulation*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.

Billig, M. (1995). *Banal nationalism.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Chen, S. (2014). *Baozou manhua* (rage comics), Internet humour and everyday life. *Journal of Media & Cultural Studies, 28*(5), 690-708.

Dawkins, R. (2006). *The selfish gene: 30th Anniversary Edition.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Di Ba crusade on Facebook, opposing Taiwan independence: Nationalist posts flooded Facebook. (January 21, 2016). *ZIWZX.* Retrieved from http://www.ziwzx.com/view/201601/18891.html

Di Ba's crusade on Facebook. (January 22, 2016). *Youth.cn.* Retrieved from http://news.youth.cn/gn/201601/t20160122_7557753.htm

Doherty, C. (2009). *Re-imagining and re-imaging the nation through the history curriculum*. Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) Conference, Brisbane, November 30-December 4, 2008. Unpublished conference paper. Queensland University of Education, Brisbane, 2016. Print.

Foucault, M. (1970). Orders of discourse. In R. Young (Ed.). *Untyping the text: A post-structuralist reader*. Boston, MA: Routledge.

Gramsci, A. (1996). *Prison Notebooks*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Howley, K. (2016). "I have a drone": Internet memes and the politics of culture. *Interactions: Studies in Communication & Culture, 7*(2), 155-175.

Huang, M. (2016, January 21). Chinese netizens flood Tsai Ing-wen's Facebook page with anti-Taiwan independence posts. *Wall Street Journal.* Retrieved from http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2016/01/21/chinese-netizens-flood-tsai-ing-wens-facebook-page-with-anti-taiwan-independence-posts/

Humphreys, A. (2015). Social media: enduring principles. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Hunt, K. and Xu, C. (2013, October 7). China "employs 2 million to police internet." *Cnn.com.* Retrieved from http://www.cnn.com/2013/10/07/world/asia/china-internet-monitors/.

Jenkins, H. (2008). Convergence culture; where old and new media collide. New York, NY: New York University Press.

JYP Entertainment. [jypentertainment]. (2016, January 15). *쯔위 공식 사과 / 周子瑜 公开致歉*. [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t57URqSp5Ew

Kress, G. & van Leeuwen, T. (1996). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design.* London: Routledge.

Leeuwen, T. (2005). *Introducing social semiotics.* London: Routledge.

Lears, T. J. J. (1985). The concept of cultural hegemony: problems and possibilities. *The American Historical Review, 90*(3), 567-593.

Li, H. (2011). Parody and resistance on the Chinese internet. In D. Herold & P. W. Marolt (Eds.), *Online society in China: creating, celebrating, and instrumentalising the online carnival* (pp. 71-88). London: Routledge.

Li Yi Ba. (n.d.) In *Baidu Baike.* Retrieved November 20, 2016, from http://baike.baidu.com/view/1121932.htm

Mina, A. (2014). Batman, pandaman and the blind man: a case study in social change memes and internet censorship in China. *Journal of Visual Culture, 13*(3), 359-375.

Rose, G. (2016). *Visual Methodologies* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Shifman, L. (2013). Memes in a digital world: reconciling with a conceptual troublemaker. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 18*, 362-377.

Szablewicz, M. (2014). The "losers" of China's internet: memes as "structures of feeling" for disillusioned young netizens. *China Information, 28*(2), 259-275.

Taiwanese Internet bombarded by Mainland *biaoqingbao,* the significance is underestimated. (January 20, 2016). *Sina.com.* Retrieved from http://news.sina.com.cn/c/gat/2016-01-20/doc-ifxnqrkc6704572.shtml

The China Internet Network Information Center. (2016). *Statistical report on internet development in China (July 2016)*. Retrieved from https://cnnic.com.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/201611/P020161114573409551742.pdf

The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue. (n.d.). *China.org.cn.* Retrieved from http://www.china.org.cn/english/taiwan/7956.htm

Wang, S. (2012). China's internet lexicon: symbolic meaning and commoditization of Grass Mud Horse in the harmonious society. *First Monday, 17*(1). Retrieved from http://firstmonday.org/article/view/3758/3134

Xu, W., Park, J., Kim, J., and Park, H. (2016). Networked cultural diffusion and creation on YouTube: an analysis of YouTube Memes. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 60*(1), 104-122.

Yu, H. (2015). After the "steamed bun" E'gao and its postsocialist politics. *Chinese Literature Today, 5*(1), 55-64.

Contact email: xl436014@ohio.edu