Racism as Dissent?
Harmonious Society, Internet Sovereignty, and Discussing Ethnic Minority in State-Regulated Cyberspace

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Abstract
In this essay, the author wants to explore how discussions of ethnic minority are embedded in a wider public discursive field in Chinese domestic digital sphere in contrast to the global cyberspace. Before carving out the netizen mentality, the concepts of “harmonious society” (Chinese: hexie shehui) and “Internet sovereignty”, two defining official discourses developed by Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the ruling entity of PRC, since the new millennium, are introduced. Under the moral stances of social harmony guarded through means of state-sponsored online regulation, Chinese netizens are positioned in a state where certain boundaries of free speech are pinned down: ethnic hatred and religious discrimination become heavily censored issues. To fulfill a harmonious socialist vision, the state actors take pain to promulgate positive images of ethnic minorities in digital media. With strict online content regulation on the other hand, overt racism/ethnic hatred is prohibited and hugely marginalized. This is in no way asserting Chinese blogosphere as a trouble-free utopia: the author illustrates further how certain netizens shun perceived punishment or social pressure, negotiate their counterattacks on state-dominant narratives and, eventually, racialize heated discussions.

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Introduction

In this essay, I want to explore how discussions of ethnic minority are embedded in a wider public discursive field in Chinese domestic digital sphere in contrast to the global cyberspace. Before carving out the netizen mentality, I introduce the concepts of “harmonious society” (Chinese: hexie shehui) and “Internet sovereignty”, two defining official discourses developed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the ruling entity of contemporary People’s Republic of China (PRC). Under the moral stances of social harmony guarded through means of state-sponsored online regulation, Chinese netizens are positioned in a state where certain boundaries of free speech are pinned down: ethnic hatred and religious discrimination become heavily censored issues. To fulfill a harmonious socialist vision, the state actors take pain to promulgate positive images of ethnic minorities in digital media. With strict online content regulation on the other hand, overt racism/ethnic hatred is prohibited and hugely marginalized. This is in no way asserting Chinese blogosphere as a trouble-free utopia: I illustrate further how certain netizens shun perceived punishment or social pressure, negotiate their counterattacks on state-dominant narratives and, eventually, racialize heated discussions.

Harmonious Society in post-Mao China

When talking about China, a crucial but commonly ignored context is that it is a culturally and ethnically inhomogeneous society em-bedded in a vast geography. Other than twenty-three provinces, five autonomous regions (Inner Mongolia, Guangxi, Tibet, Ningxia, and Xinjiang) are reserved because of a higher population of ethnic minorities (The State Council, 2014). Scholarly review over multiculturalism in PR China is divided. While one school argues that Chinese nationalism is based on the very imagination of a biological specific entity (“the yellow river origin and the yellow skin pigment”, see Dikötter, 1994) and that cultural marginalization and blocked mobility of ethnic minorities are taking place (Kaltman, 2014), others offer more context-specific demonstrations. As McArthur (2009) documented, instead of “enforcing conformity”, state actors actively participated in the ethnic revival of Dai, Bai, and Hui minorities in post-Mao southwest China. In this essay, I will discuss Chinese multiculturalism not so much as a social reality but more as a policy-oriented construction. That is, I will try to carve out how the state agency orients itself in governing tensional issues regarding Chinese nationality, ethnic minorities and multicultural mediation. The Communist Party has been developing its own narrative in legitimizing the one-party rule in China. Under Hu Jintao’s leadership, “harmonious society/world” became the defining discourse in response to an increasingly disparate society (Zheng & Tok, 2007) and was later also embedded into the “Chinese Dream” narrative in Xi’s age (Kivimäki, 2014). This discourse foregrounds the coordination between diverging social units: regional, ur-
ban/rural, and ethnical. Social harmony, comparing to the notion of multiculturalism, prioritizes unifying collaboration instead of cross-sectional differentialism. It is articulated as a settlement after the land has witnessed wide ideological gaps and various forms of governments in a short century: the collapse of Manchu-governed Qing Dynasty (1912), the civil war between KMT and CCP regimes (1945-1948), the foundation of People’s republic of China (1949), cultural revolution (1966-1976), the political reform (since 1978) and the market reform (since 1992). Such governing order, I contend, is not so much “authoritarian” but rather “paternalistic”: the center state is a needed guardian and ultimate arbitrator of harmonious social order. It is a fundamental departure from western-style democracy based on the assumptions of liberalism, civic autonomy, and individualism.

Chinese officials see information communication technologies primarily from a utilitarian perspective and locate them as a state-regulated conductive tool for economic and social development (Jiang, 2010:74). The latest figure in 2014 shows that the number of mainland netizens has reached 632 million, and almost doubled compared to 338 million in 2009 (CNNIC, 2016). This shows the socialist government’s endeavor to make technology accessible to different social layers rather than taking it away. While embracing the economic boon of digital industry, CCP officials see Internet technology critically as a potentially destabilizing factor of domestic social order. This concern is legitimate, as identity politics in western social media become fragmented and, disturbingly, radicalized. Internet, despite the promise of world connections, nurtures the culture of white supremacism (Burris et al., 2000), online Islamophobia (Ekman, 2015) and the far-right populist family (Chris Hale, 2012; Titley, 2014; Siapera & Veikou, 2016). Studies of group polarization (Schafer, 2002; Yardi & Boyd, 2010), echo chamber (Wallsten, 2005; Gilbert et al., 2009; Colleoni, et al., 2014) and filter bubble (Pariser, 2011; Nguyen et al., 2014) show the technological features of the Internet that actually hinder individual netizens from becoming tolerant to different mindsets. In 2010, the State Council Information Office (SCIO) of the PRC put forward the concept of “Internet sovereignty” (SCIO, 2010), claiming that “[w]ithin Chinese territory the Internet is under the jurisdiction of Chinese sovereignty. [...] Citizens of the People’s Republic of China and foreign citizens, legal persons and other organizations within Chinese territory must obey the laws and regulations of China and conscientiously protect Internet security” (as cited in Jiang, 2010). According to Weibo Community Regulation (2015), certain information is deemed illicit.
Users have the right to publish the information, but are prohibited from publishing information containing the following: (1) against the basic principles established by the Constitution; (2) harming national unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity; (3) disclosing state secrets and endangering national security or harming national honor and interests; (4) inciting ethnic hatred, ethnic discrimination, undermining national unity, or against ethnic customs and habits; (5) violating the state religion policies or propagating cult and superstition; (6) spreading rumors, disturbing social order or undermining social stability; (7) advocating obscenity, gambling, violence, pornography, murder, terrorism or abetting a crime; (8) inciting illegal assembly, association, procession and demonstration to disturb social order; (9) other content against national laws and administrative regulations. (Article 13)

A close look at the regulation reveals the logic of content censorship. The ban of certain speech serves both in the legal and moral grounds; it constitutes fluid boundaries of social values and positions a sovereign identity around them. For example, what differentiates Chinese cyberspace from its global counterpart created by transnational capitalistic giants is that netizens are warned, in the name of national harmony, not to propagate superstition, pornography, and ethnic hatred. Albeit being “not free enough”, information flow on Sina Weibo was criticized as the “world’s best rumor-mongering machine ever” (Larson, 2011; Larson, 2012). Starting from March 2012, SCIO took a harsh punishment to a number of websites according to the rule of law (Xinhuanet, 2012). Roughly during the same period, Sina Weibo introduced the real-name registration (RnR) and the verification system that urged new users to hand in personal information to the service provider. Punishments on the platform will follow when misconduct is detected (Weibo Community Regulation, 2015).

The site will actively probe Weibo misconduct and accept the report from verified users. (Article 24)

Misconduct sanction includes: content sanction and account sanction. Content sanction includes: deletion of content, prohibition of being forwarded, prohibition of comments, sanction label, and so on. Account sanction includes: prohibition of publishing content, prohibition from being followed, and so on, until cancellation. (Article 26)

This government-sponsored gesture of censorship, in the eyes of liberal scholars, is an intrusion of individual freedom and causes chilling
effects (Chen et al., 2013; Fu et al., 2013; King et al., 2013). It is true to some extent that Chinese netizens are faced with “the largest and most sophisticated filtering systems in the world” (OpenNet Initiative, 2012) but the content regulation is far from arbitrary and serving only “the interest of communist dictatorship”. In the following section I will infuse my observation of how space of free speech in terms of multiculturalism is negotiated by state actors and Chinese netizens.

**Chinese as Ethnic Grand Integration**

The Central Committee of the Communist Youth League of China (CYLC) runs an iconic account in Sina Weibo that attracts over 4 million subscribers. In May 11th, @CYLC posted a video with the description “What are Xinjiang people.......? [emoticon: question face]”. The six-minute short documentary is a collection of five students who are from Xinjiang Autonomous Region and studying in mainland metropolises (Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing). By talking about their personal experiences to the camera, the interviewees provide a rich context for a lot of heated issues regarding regional/ethnic stereotypes in contemporary China. In the beginning, the transcript goes,

“I am from Xinjiang, but I really don’t know how to ride a horse / I am from Xinjiang, but I know more than singing and dancing / I am from Xinjiang; I am neither a thief nor a terrorist / I am from Xinjiang, but I’ve never eaten a cut cake1 / I am from Xinjiang, but I am Chinese just as you are”

This start sets the tone of the whole video. It is a narrative of identificational sameness and difference. Five characters, coming from cities such as Ürümqi, Kashgar or Ili, identify themselves as “Xinjiang people” (Chinese: xinjiang ren). Their imagined audience is Chinese living outside the Xinjiang Autonomous Region who might misunderstand or have biased opinions toward people from that area. “I am just as Chinese as you are” is a pivot assertion; it renders the identity of “Xinjiang people” secondary to the overarching position of being “Chinese people”, i.e, putting differentiation after the value of social unification. After this introduction, the video showcases more detailed anecdotes of the interviewees. Jiang commented on viewing Xinjiang as a region of homogeneous ethnicity,

“When fellow students in mainland hear the word ‘Xinjiang people’, they tend to generalize it as a synonym for ‘minority ethnicities’ (Chinese: shaoshu minzu); but actually we incorporate

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both ethnic minorities and Han people”.

Ailifeire addressed “silly questions” that pejoratively imagine Xinjiang as an undeveloped hinterland: “are you living in the desert”, “how many times do you take a shower in a year”, or “have you ever tasted a torte”. Nijat, at first entrapped in these negative stereotypes, illustrated his later shift in attitude.

“When I was in Beijing for my university foundation year, people mistook me as foreigners and spoke English to me; at that time I would rather play a foreigner, because I thought telling them about my Xinjiang origin will result in me being treated like a terrorist and thief. […] After I came to Nanjing, never once more have I imitated a foreigner again. I initiatively introduced myself as a Xinjiang person to strangers. That will create an alternative impression: Xinjiang people as a university student, a fluent mandarin speaker who is polite. […] Changes start in details. Let’s do what one can do slowly and hope for some bits of influence.”

This monologue provides a touching voice of the minority groups in China. Just as another interviewee discussed, Chinese minority ethnics such as Uyghur carry idiosyncratic biological features (physiognomy and oftentimes skin color) different from the dominant Han people. That is why Nijat was treated as a “foreigner” (Chinese: waiguioren). Interesting, but also ironic, is the fact that Nijat felt better being positioned in the role of a foreign citizen rather than a Xinjiang person². But he altered his mind at last and took the initiative to make the image of Xinjiang better to mainland society. From here the theme of the video emerges. It is not merely a call for the respect of difference but also an appeal to celebrate integration. The character finds a third solution beyond the dichotomy of a helpless victim from discrimination and a confrontational extremist against the rivals. National harmony, as is discussed earlier, must be rooted in the cooperation from both sides of social tension. In the end of the documentary, Jiang added “to friends from mainland: when you have time or vacation, please do visit Xinjiang in person”. He finished his word by saying “When the music starts, we can dance and sing, together and freely; that is a very happy thing.” “We” constructs an inclusive identity that incorporates Xinjiang people and mainland people (Chinese: neidi ren). The metaphor of dancing and singing is a future-oriented vision of social harmony.

The analysis of fine-grained textual details in @CLYC’s video post provides some vivid entries for the understanding of Chinese multi-

² A similar story that discusses the identity of Uyghur Chinese and foreigner can be approached under http://www.huffingtonpost.com/china-hands/an-outsiders-inside-look_b_9856680.html
culturalism. The Chinese state plays an active role in shaping the discourse of social harmony. It doesn’t mean a simplistic rejection of the existence of ethnical conflicts as an increasing social problem; on the contrary, the state confronts such hot potatoes. The posted video in examination starts with depicting persistent social discrimination that perpetuates Uyghur citizens from Xinjiang. The interviewees who feel unfairly treated are inviting the audience to touch their subjective experiences. But the video isn’t a collection of one-sided complains. Although the interviewees talk about their stories in individual narratives, the whole trajectory is the soul searching for collective identity (from “I” to “we”). It assumes an imagined collectivity (“we”, “Chinese”) of which both Xinjiang (“I”) and mainland people (“you”, the invisible audience as participant of the dialogue) are integral parts. The potentially destabilizing factor is the tension and misunderstanding between two subgroups in a greater entity and the solution is not so much fighting for each pole’s own fragmented interest but rather to seek common ground and mutual consensus. This narrative implicitly defines “Chineseness” from civic sense rather than biological, racial or ethnical aspects (Dikötter, 1994). “Chinese” is not portrayed as an exclusive tag for “yellow skinned, black haired” Han people, but a harmonious integration of different ethnic minorities.

**Alternative agendas: Racism as dissent?**

The integration narrative supported by state agency is only part of the following online discussions, or the very beginning of them. The documentary video received 2853 likes, 3872 reposts, and 1818 comments in Weibo (data in December 2016). My second inquiry in this essay is to take a close look into the voice of citizens: how they perceive, re-interpret, or negotiate the original messages implanted in the video. Using Hall’s encoding/decoding model (1980), I broadly group the commentators into three groups: dominant/hegemonic position, negotiated position, and oppositional position. Those who express agreement to @CLYC’s documentary take the meaning of messages directly.

@Zhouyiyang: my impression of Xinjiang people is that they all look super pretty [emoticon: love]/
@Huangyugongzi: I am from Xinjiang and I am crying watching it. So warm~~~/
@mohaimio: actually I believe a lot of people are deceived by partial incidents. Like us Guangdong people. I was questioned by others whether I eat bugs and stuff, and I was awkward. You will never understand something if you didn’t experience it yourself. If you didn’t experience something, don’t be misled by hearsays. Let’s hope everybody can build discus-
sions on the basis on real personal experiences/ @Sunxiaohie: friends from Xinjiang, Henan, Guangxi, my regards.

In internet some people like to turn the discussion into regional attacks, but that only represents a tiny portion of people. Please don’t get angry [emoticon: love].

We are all sons and daughters of Chinese family [emoticon: smile] [emoticon: smile].

To these netizens, they comprehend the idea of social harmony and focus on the positive experiences (“so warm” to @Huangyugongzi) embedded in the video. @Zhouyiyan talks about the physiognomy (“look supper pretty”) of Xinjiang people, while not specifying their ethnic backgrounds (Uyghur, Hui, or Han, for example). @mohaimio adds a dimension of experience and hearsay in support of the argument that many stereotypes of Xinjiang people come from ignorance and it needs to be changed. @Sunxiaohie projects herself into the role of participant in a cross-regional dialogue, as is activated in the video. She further expressed the idea of “sons and daughters of Chinese family” (Chinese: zhonghua ernv), resembling what I interpreted as “the grand ethnic integration” in the last chapter. From these comments, I would argue that multicultural/multiethnic social harmony in China is buttressed by the consensus that there is an overarching identity of “Chinese”. But it is not a homogenizing monolith but rather internally diverse and allows room for regional, cultural, and ethnical difference.

In contrast to those who accept the whole package of information in the video, some netizens remain skeptic.

@huximi: I have to say, some Xinjiang people are rather shameless [emoticon: sardonic grin]. Don’t have a glass heart. I mean it. [emoticon: sardonic grin]/ @Joyzhuoyue: good folks welcome. Thieves go back where you are from! / @xiemaoyan: isn’t it Shanghai people that are under greater attack? / @kimiqd: Even with this good publicity work, those thieves on the street will ruin it quickly.

They acknowledge some parts of the video but are not willing to accept all of it. A common point of negotiation is the level of substantial discrimination portrayed by the documentary interviewees. @huximi and @joyzhuoyue both make a differentiation between “good” and “bad” Xinjiang people, and argue that discrimination is legitimate as long as it is targeted at the “bad” ones. @xiemaoyan raises an interesting view typical among other comments. While admitting that discrimination against Xinjiang people does exist, she sees regional stereotype as not being singular in contemporary China and points out the victims from other regions
(“Shanghai people”). @kimi-iqdl consents that the documentary is good as “publicity work” (Chinese: xuanchuan, also meaning “propaganda” in a negative connotation) but he implies that it is deviant from the social reality (“thieves on the street”).

What’s more, there are voices that directly challenge the official narratives.

@Gangziniandeshabai: I don’t have a regional discrimination problem. Out of tens of ethnicities in Xinjiang and in a big country like China, I only look down upon Uyghur and Hui people. One of them specializes in producing extremists who only recognize Turkey and Saudi Arabia as their mother country; one of them revolts and kills Han people every time China encounters turbulence in the past hundred years and now even relentlessly promulgates Islam law as superior to the state constitution in densely populated regions in China. [...] I know there are good folks, like rice picked out of a pot of rat shits. This comment brings a clear logic contrary to the social harmony narrative.

@5anvey: The government is responsible. Every time Xinjiang people commit a crime, the police will release them rather than take harsh punishment (it appears to be because of ethnic harmony). These Xinjiang criminals become increasingly rampant and commit more crimes. They will even use a knife to threat citizens after caught stealing (I was once confronted with a knife after stopping Xinjiang thief’s’ action). The Xinjiang street barbecue causes a smoke problem to the neighborhood but the urban inspectors basically ignore it (my location: Luohu, Shenzhen). This kind of tolerance upgrades the interethnic hatred.

@5anvey talks about stealing and minority politics in China. Using his own examples, he illustrates how state agency “spoils” Xinjiang criminals because of their minority ethnicity; this tilted policy of forced ethnic harmony would, he argued, backfire on its original purpose, creating more interethnic tension.
**Conclusion**

Through the above analysis, it is telling that the discussion of ethnic minorities spins a wide ideational spectrum in Chinese social media. State actors promote the dominant discourse of social harmony as the starting point to frame interethnic issues. It is being accepted, negotiated, and refused by various individual netizens who add their personal feelings, experiences or knowledge as evidence into the public discourse. Although overt trolling is censored according to Weibo Community Regulation (2015), netizens who are unsatisfied by the state-supported minority politics still manage to find ways to express their grievance in cohesive logic and appropriate wording. While challenging the discourse of harmonious society as a wishful thinking of escaping social tension, such doing reproduces anti-minority voices as marginalized dissident.
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