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# Internet, "Rivers and Lakes": Locating Chinese Alternative Public Sphere

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## Abstract

Internet is supposed to have natural and inherent relationship with democratization, and is also supposed to act as the main battlefield for the public to fight against the authoritarian. The Internet in China, however, does not serve as the "democratic public sphere" for people to fight against the ruling power directly and roundly; instead, it seems to be a Chinese style term of "Jianghu" 江湖—literally means "rivers and lakes"—an "alternative public sphere" for Chinese people. This article was from the perspective of cultural studies, based on the methodology of case study and textual analysis. It took two cases, namely, the Event of South China Tiger Photos and Event of Deng Yujiao 邓玉娇, to analyze the cultural practice of Internet events, particularly the expression channels, emotion mobilizations and communication mechanisms of netizens, indicating the emergence of China alternative public sphere and its implication to the state and society.

## Keywords

## 1. Introduction

New media can always obtain people's unlimited imagination. Originally designed around 1969 to allow the exchange of packets of bits among computers, Internet has not only gave computer life and soul, but also gave world hope and desire, and in the meantime, continued to construct people's imagination of challenging authoritarian and fighting for democracy in the over past four decades. In China, especially, such kind of imagination seems to have been given additional hope. Rooted in specific context of China's network society, this study was from the perspective of cultural studies, based on methodology of case study and textual analysis, implicating the emergence of alternative public sphere, aiming to contribute some fresh views to the discussion of network politics and network culture in China.

## 2. Internet: New Imagination of Public Sphere in China

A large amount of scholars have built up the intrinsic link of Internet and democratization (Norris, 2001). Compared to the previous Greek democracy and the modern democracy, the democracy brought by Internet, is imagined as Digital Democracy (Grossman, 1995), Virtual Democracy (Norris, 1999), Electronic Democracy (Gibson, Roèmmele, & Ward, 2004), and Cyber Democracy (Poster, 1998), etc., and is considered as a new beginning and a new wave of global democratization. Some scholars even maintain that the democracy brought by Internet is more superior to secular democracy in its form of interaction and self-governance (Vandenberg, 2000).

This imagination is rooted in the intrinsic democratic structure of Internet because of its five distinctive characteristics: digitality, convergency, interactivity, hypertextuality, and virtuality (Chen, 2012). The democratic structure and distinctive characteristics propose the public a new and unprecedented opportunity to participate in public and political issues, which, to a great extent, gives people the agency and capacity of "self-communication" (Castells, 2007) to break the blockade or other political control to create or expand democracy. The initial identity of Internet, therefore, is supposed to be a tool or channel for political participation and civil education. In pre-Internet era, people either lacked the effective channels for political participation, or the rational knowledge and sense of responsibility needed in political participation yet monopolized by the elite. As a result, sometimes people even gave up their rights to involve in political life though some channels did exist (Barber, 1984). But in the Internet age, people enjoy more sufficient education of politics and democracy, and more various choices of political participation. However, apart from being a tool or channel, more importantly, Internet gives people new imagination of public sphere.

Traditional researches on public sphere, mainly based on Habermas's theoretical framework of "spontaneous association-free discussion-making consensus" (Habermas, 1989a), concern whether Internet is able to provide the public a "democratic public sphere" for free expression, dialogue promoting, and finally influencing government's decision-making (Dahlberg, 2001; Gimmler, 2001; Liu & Lou, 2009; Norris, 2001; Tumber, 2001; Papacharissi, 2002). Generally, these researches are every limited in the tradition of political liberalism in Europe and North America. For instance, Dyer-Witheford's (1999) study on North American experience reveals that Internet endows civil society with power to set up public discussion topics, express critical ideas, organize alliances and mobilize collective actions.

However, some scholars have pointed out that such researches set rationality against sensibility, knowledge against entertainment, politics against culture, ruling out public criticisms that hidden in various forms of cultural expression in the cyberspace (Dahlgren, 2006; Downing, 2001), as well as public communication forms that are alternative, subaltern, resistant and on behalf of multiple identities (Fraser, 1992; Gardiner, 2004; Stevenson, 2003). Therefore, from cultural studies perspective, some scholars try to combine traditional researches with Foucauldian analysis of power relationship, viewing Internet as a field composed of numerous sub-fields of contradictions, differences, and even conflicts, as an "alternative public sphere" in which people in dominated status compete for space and resource to develop alternative expression, to conduct new forms of cultural resistance, and to perform "resistant identity" (Castells, 1997; Dean, 2003; Downey & Fenton, 2003; Liu, 2009; Poster, 2001). These researches are focus on different experiences, multicultural practices, and autonomous communication activities conducted by youth subculture groups, social movement organizations, or activist individuals in diverse network spaces (Atton, 2002; Downing, 2001), aiming to discover civil resistant cultural practice ignored by traditional public sphere studies (Stevenson, 2003; Dahlgren, 2006), cultural activism with spirit of experimental innovation (Downing, 2001; Khan & Kellner, 2005), and finally "alternative public sphere" (Liu & Lou, 2009) outside "official public sphere" (Jakubowicz, 1991), "virtual public sphere" (Papacharissi, 2002) and "weak public sphere" (Fraser, 1992).

As Habermas acknowledges the existence of informal public sphere, and stresses the importance of the meaning of "life world", researches on Internet public sphere are supposed to remain open to different fantasies, desires and emotions (Stevenson, 2003). Rooted in the Chinese context and from a cultural studies perspective, this study aimed to reveal the emergence of China alternative public sphere by examining the expression channels, emotion mobilizations and communication mechanisms of netizens, with case study of typical Internet events, including the Event of South China Tiger Photos and Event of Deng Yujiao 邓玉娇. This study purposed to provide new imagination for studies on public sphere, and meanwhile, contribute to the knowledge base of network politic and network culture in China.

## 3. China: Internet as "Rivers and Lakes"

China has officially overtaken Japan as the world's second largest economy after thirty years' development since its reform and opening policy and market-oriented economic reform. In the meantime, China has successfully surpassed the United States in 2009 to be the country with the largest number, 384 million, of Internet users, and the number has reached 564 million in 2012 (CNNIC, 2013). Such accompanied development of economy and Internet stimulates scholars' expectation of Internet's being an important force in the democratization of China. Politicians, for example, Bill Clinton, also claimed that China's control of the Internet-led political changes would become more and more difficult and ultimately futile (Kluver & Qiu, 2003). Scholars or politicians who hold this optimistic view generally believe that Internet endows Chinese netizens with unprecedented source of information, space of expression and ability of anonymous campaign. For instance, Hachigian (2001) claims that Internet's ability to provide vast amounts of information makes it to be the biggest challenge for authoritarian power, even though this power tries to manipulate public opinion through traditional media in its favor thereby guiding people to accept its political legitimacy. Similarly, Sheff (2002) asserts that Internet has already demonstrated its power to shake China's consistent political lag, isolation and repression. Some scholars even optimistically believe that the Internet-based civil society—"network civil society"—has emerged in China (Yang, 2003; Yang & Calhoun, 2007).

Some scholars, however, are pessimistic about the future of Internet. They are worried about the negative aspects of the Internet, namely, the excessive commercialization of Internet (McChesney, 1999), the mediocrity of network politics (Castells, 1997), and even the intrinsic "anti-democracy" of Internet (Barney, 2000). They also criticize the "instrumentalization" of Internet, worrying that Internet may be reduced to be a "democratic tool" for those in power, who use Internet as a tool to increase their ability of surveillance and supervision on the public. For example, Kalathil & Boas's (2001) research on Cuba and China shows that governments of Cuba and China have successfully controlled the Internet through proactive and reactive strategies, with complicated Internet surveillance and supervision system.

From the current situation, China's Internet is neither a battlefield for the public to fight against the ruling power, promoting China to become the largest democracy body in the world, nor a democratic tool or a monitoring tool of the ruling power as the pessimists worried. China's Internet is playing a game between these two extremes, yet the balance seems to be more inclined to the pessimists: China's Internet does not yet exert a substantial impact on China's democratization process (Kluver & Qiu, 2003). To some extent, China's Internet has not only avoided its role of being the battlefield for the people to fight against the ruling power, but also avoided acting as a bridge between the public and the government. It just simply bypasses the power bloc and the communication system under government control (Liu & Lou, 2009), leading to an alternative, subaltern, and resistant public communication space (Dahlgren, 2006), an "alternative public sphere" (Liu & Lou, 2009).

For such a multiple, informal, non-consensus alternative public sphere, Chinese style term of *jianghu* 江湖—which literally means "Rivers and Lakes"—could be an imaginative metaphor of the alternative, subaltern, and resistant space, rather than official sense of *miaotang* 庙堂—which literally means "Temple"—or other concept like "Square" in ancient Greece. This "Jianghu" style "alternative public sphere" differs from the traditional "bourgeois public sphere" which is "open in principle to all citizens" who may "assemble and unite freely, and express and publicize their opinions freely (Habermas, 1989b: p. 231)." The China Internet Jianghu, as an "alternative public sphere", by contrast, does not confront with the ruling power directly and roundly, but resist and struggle improvisationally and sinuously. These resistance and struggles do not directly touch the core governance issues of the party-state machine (Wu Guoguang, 2003), and even keep a safe distance and ambiguous relationship with the ruling power (Liu, 2009).

People in this alternative public sphere, accordingly, do not come out to be democracy fighters on the political square, but are more similar to the *caomang* 草莽 ("outlaws of the marshes") or *xiake* 侠客 ("knight-errant") in "rivers and lakes". Though they occupy their own opinions battlefields like forums, blogs, post bar, micro-blogs, wechats, etc., their activities are just "instantaneous contraction and release of collective movement" (Li Yonggang, 2009), relying on alternative means like "hot postings", "add water", spoof, cheap copy, human flesh search engine, etc. Through these "alternative means", they create their own alternative expression channels, emotion mobilizations and communication mechanisms, but they usually just "begin with instantaneous satisfaction, and end with instantaneous oblivion" (Xu Zhiyuan, 2008), indicating the emergence of "alternative public sphere" in Chinese sense of Jianghu, rather than "democratic public sphere" in western sense.

## 4. Cases: Emergence of Alternative Public Sphere

Focused on these "alternative means" of expression channels, emotion mobilizations and communication mechanisms, this article took two "Internet Events", namely, the Event of South China Tiger Photos and Event of Deng Yujiao, as case study to illustrate the emergence of the alternative public sphere in China.

Generally, Internet activisms are divided into two categories: one is offline organizations or individuals using Internet to mobilize and protest, and the other is protest behavior that happens directly in cyberspace (Vegh, 2003). Currently western scholars show more interest in the former. Viewing Internet as a new type of resource or tool for mobilization, they aim to study how Internet is used by social movement organizations to mobilize and organize social movements. For instance, Garrett (2006) conducts a research on the roles of Internet in social movements. He believes that Internet as new information technology helps reduce the cost of participation and catalyze the construction of collective identity, thus promoting the collective mobilization, accelerating the movement prevalence, as well as providing new ways of action.

In the specific context of China, even Internet Jianghu serves as the main platform of network movements like the West, it neither merely belongs to the former category of "means" or "instruments", nor entirely belongs to the second category of "direct network protest". It is more inclined to be the Chinese style concept of "Internet Events" (Yang Guobin, 2009), a new type of collective action, enjoying the characteristics of both traditional offline protests and new online activisms, and exerting a much larger social impact on reality than the common online rights protection, online anti-corruption, online signature, online civil relief and other online activities. As for the academic analysis, the classical theory of social movement and its three core concepts, namely, political opportunity, resources organization, and framework construction, all fail to offer convincing explanation and analysis of Internet events (Yang Guobin, 2009). Therefore, this article attempted to study Internet events from a cultural studies perspective, with method of textual analysis, focusing on the "shaping force" and "work of power" (Lee, 2003) of the text, in the text, through the text. The analysis focused on the "alternative means" of the Internet events, particularly the expression channels, emotion mobilizations and communication mechanisms of the netizens, aiming to illustrate the emergence of alternative public sphere in China, and to interpret its implication to the state and society.

### 4.1. Event of South China Tiger Photos

On October 3, 2007, Zhou Zhenglong 周正龙, a villager from Shaanxi Province, claimed that he had taken a photo of one of the endangered animals—South China Tigers. This photo was quickly confirmed by Shaanxi Provincial Forestry Department, which, however, was strongly questioned by netizens once announced. The event continued for roughly a year until June 29, 2008, Shaanxi Province government announced that the tiger in Zhou's picture was from New Year Pictures. Due to the event's profound social impact, Southern Weekend, a quite influencing news magazine in South China, put "Tiger-Hunting Netizens" on the candidates list of the "Top Ten Persons", and NetEase, one of China's largest Internet portals, positioned the event as one of the "Top Ten News Events in 2007".

At the beginning of the event, two guarantees—one was the photographer Zhou Zhenglong, who guaranteed the authenticity of his photos with his head, and the other one was Fu Dezhi 傅德志, a researcher from the Institute of Botany of China who guaranteed the photos to be fake with his head—pulled the debates on the authenticity or affectation of the photo and divided netizens into two camps of *ting hu pai* 挺虎派 ("Tiger-Supporting Faction") and *da hu pai* 打虎派 ("Tiger-Hunting Faction"). This kind of Jianghu style "heads gamble" (*naodai duidu* 脑袋对赌) stimulated netizens' enthusiasm of texts creation at once:

Tianya—one of the biggest forums in China—emerged a serials of hot postings: *If the Picture is True, February Girl is Willing to Have Sex with It*; *Historical Records, Martyr Biography, February Girl*; *Solemn Statement—Never Say About Having Sex with Tiger*; *Warn Sternly to February Girl*; *South China Tiger Sue February Girl for Rape*, etc.

There was a spoof Internet song adapted from famous nursery rhyme, *One Two Three Four*, *Take Photos of Tigers on Mountain*: One two three four, take photos of tigers on mountain. There is no tiger on mountain, thereby making a fake tiger. He said that was south China tiger, and guaranteed with his head.

Another Internet song *Stretch out Your Hand*: Stretch out your left hand, stretch out your right hand, pat pat your head. How large leafs are, that they could cover the head of the tiger. Stretch out your left hand,

stretch out your right hand, pat pat your ass. How large leafs are, that they could cover the ass of the tiger.

There was free verse *Tiger*: Change, Success, Telephoto, Bluff, Humanity.

There were also literary sketches, critical vignettes, ironic essays, micro movies etc.

Internet portal, *NetEase*, even hold a Photoshop Design Competition on this event, that netizens creatively designed photos like *Astronauts Found Tiger in Moon*; *Netizens Found Dinosaur in Shannxi*; *Netizens Found Saddam Hussein* (**Figure 1**).

These web texts, covering forms of writing materials, images, audios, videos etc., used topics, discourse and stories as their expression mechanism to add fuel to the flames, set "hot postings", "add water", follow-ups, comments postings as a grassroots voting mechanism to aggregate preference, and employed spoof, cheap copy, human flesh search as a power digestion mechanism for mass carnival (Li Yonggang, 2009). These texts mostly make use of—*egao* 恶搞 (known as spoof or mock in English), a sort of aesthetic practices and cultural spectacle, constituting a field of cultural struggles with transformative potentials to the passive attitude that Guy Debord (2002) criticizes about spectacles. This spectacle has gradually emerged as one of the most striking culture phenomenon in China, even though it also provokes severe debates (Liu, 2013). Taking a historical perspective, egao is not essentially new. It can be dated back to ancient Greece where a parodia is a narrative poem imitating the style and prosody of epics "but treating light, satirical or mock-heroic subjects (Dentith, 2000: p. 10)." China's ironic novels in the Ming-Qing era, *pizi* 痞子 literatures in mainland China and—*wulitou* 无厘头 films in Hong Kong can also be seen as the longstanding tradition in which egao is rooted (Liu, 2013).

In contemporary China Internet Jianghu, as we could see in this case, netizens draw on a wide range of cultural resource, transform film culture symbols, popular culture elements, current affairs, social rumors, all things that are interesting in daily life, and put all these originally uncorrelated and uncoordinated symbols together as different expressive forms such as narratives, poems, puns, songs, images and videos, producing unexpected ironic, humorous and dramatic effect (Liu & Lou, 2009; Liu, 2013). These creative, ironic and subversive discourses, literatures, images, and videos are further exposed and circulated online for new circles of aesthetic practice. This kind of paradigm shift or culture spectacle is also conceptualized by Henry Jenkins (2006) as "convergence culture", through which Jenkins highlights the participation culture that empowers people to participate the circle of culture production and consumption, directly and actively. China netizens, as we have seen in this case, like the other ones all over the world, have escaped the restricting mode of "source-message-receivers". To some extent, the netizens have become active audiences rather than traditional passive ones, because they are no longer passively in the dominated positions as audiences and consumers, but at the same time, as culture disseminators and producers (Willis, 1990). That is also why some scholars argue that the boundary and distinction between "production" and "consumption" have been blurred and even dispelled, and these two terms have converged as the so-called "produsage" or "prosumption" (Bruns, 2009). In fact, this sense of "produsage" or "prosumption" has helped ordinary people to create sort of carnivalesque culture that "brings down to earth" anything ineffable or authoritarian by satirical, parodic and grotesque realism, enchanting "the laughter of the people" (Bakhtin, 1984), because "the greatest enemy of authority is contempt, and that the surest way to undermine it is laughter (Arendt 1970: p. 45)."

This kind of *egao*, as sort of aesthetic practice or carnivalesque culture, is also similar to the "culture jamming" of activists in Europe and America (Harold, 2007; Jordan, 2002; Khan & Kellner, 2005), which is usually considered as sort of cultural and political resistance movement, with characteristics of blocking, damaging, fooling and stealing all that are regarded as governing power against media and culture (Harold, 2007). Based on Foucault's theory of "discipline" and Deleuze's theory of "control", Harold (2007) proposes three models, namely, sabotage, appropriation and intensification, and augmentation, to help culture jamming to deal with such "discipline" and "control". These are three strategic sets for culture jamming, as well as three commonly used strategies and tactics for Internet egao in China, transforming traditional images, roles and meanings produced by mainstream media into their own cultural resources to dramatize events and create resistance (Downing, 2001), showing kind of "clever and cunning resistance" in the cyberspace (Yang, 2009).

To some extent, *egao*, as this case has demonstrated, is far beyond serving as a channel for releasing grievances and frustrations, but expressing the collective attitude toward the governing power, making their own "political statement" (Jenkins, 2006) as critique (Liu, 2013). "Critique", for Foucault, is "the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourse of truth

Astronauts Found Tiger in Moon　　Netizens Found Dinosaur in Shannxi　　Netizens Found Saddam Hussein

**Figure 1.** PS competition of South China Tiger, source: Netease, http://news.163.com/special/00012FD0/tiger071113.html

(Foucoult, 2007: p. 47)." Therefore, the vivid and provocative egao practice about the "true or fake" of the tiger photo, as kind of "discourse of truth", is ultimately "critique" and "political statement" of the people towards their government, leading to a possibility of "the politics of truth" (Foucault, 2007).

However, such sort of aesthetic practice and political critique are usually downplayed and considered as "vulgarity" in mainstream academic researches, rarely attract adequate attention and never obtain due respect and appreciation. Even some scholars pay attention to it, their researches are every limited to youth subculture (Willis, 1990). But in China Internet Jianghu, the main body of egao practice, as this case has showed, has gradually extended from youth subculture groups to different society sectors, forming diverse online communities for various forms of alternative and cultural expression, practice, and resistance, in combination of creative cultures, games, videos, literatures, entertainment, politics, social protest, etc. In a sense, it gives some clues to the emergence of China Internet Jianghu as alternative public sphere in China.

## 4.2. Event of Deng Yujiao

Event of Deng Yujiao occurred in Badong, Enshi, Hubei province. On May 12, 2009, three local officials went to a hotel for relaxation after drinking, and asked the waitress Deng Yujiao to provide sex services. When their request got rejected, physical conflicts occurred, in which an official was stabbed to death by Deng. The event became a hot issue in cyberspace once reported by the media. Deng was also praised as the "contemporary martyr" by many netizens and became an idol that fought against official tyranny.

Differed from the amusing beginning of "heads gamble" of Event of South China Tiger Photos, the intensive conflicts of "civilian's killing official" brought a tragic color to Event of Deng Yujiao at the beginning. From Frye's (1957) typology of literature, the Event of South China Tiger Photos belonged to the type of "comedy" or "irony", while the Event of Deng Yujiao belonged to the type of "tragedy" or "legend" (Yang Guobin, 2009). Therefore, compared to the "visual spoofs" created out of the Event of South China Tiger Photos, texts created out of the Event of Deng Yujiao were more inclined to be "tragic literature". Netizens named Deng as a "vestal virgin", a "martyr", a "heroine", creating many pieces of symphonic poems and ironic essays to praise her "chastity":

Adapted from the most famous history book, the *Shiji*史记, they created series articles of Shiji: *Series of Martyr Deng Yujiao*借《史记》创作"史记·烈女邓玉娇列传系列"; Adapted from classical literature *Look at Several* by *Zhuge Liang* 诸葛亮, they created New *Look at Several*: *Raise Warfare Climax between the People and the Official* 借《出师表》创作"新出师表——掀起人民讨伐贪官的战争高潮"; Adapted from famous article in the textbook, *To My Wife*, they created *To My Wife*: *Mourn for Deng Yujia* 借《与妻书》创作"与妻书——悼亡妻邓玉娇文"; Adapted from Chairman Mao's quotations and influential song, *Follow the Good Example of Lei Feng*, they created *Follow the Good Example of Deng Yujiao*借《学习雷锋好榜样》创作《学习玉娇好榜样》等. These sorts of texts were too numerous to mention one by one, including jingles, comments, antithetical couplets, novels, epics, etc.

Within this emotional "tragic literature", netizens expressed their feeling, emotion, sympathy, shock and anger with abandon. Of course, there were still some netizens using egao as culture jamming to show their grievance and anger, for instance, they created the spoof texts of "Martial Arts" version, "New Hua Mulan" 新花木兰 edition (**Figure 2**) and so on, including text, picture, video, etc.:

From cultural studies perspective, this sort of banter line greatly differs from the sadness line, but they both
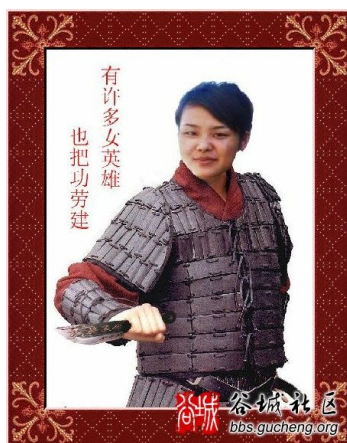
**Figure 2.** Mulan style Deng Yujiao, source:
http://ent.sina.com.cn/bbs/2009/1210/183918905.html

show a special kind of "resistant narrative" (Atton, 2002). Textual analysis of these "tragic literature"—here, a peculiar form of "inter-textuality" (Hall, 1997) that draws on different texts and alters their meanings in new contexts—reveals ideas of cultural resistance and activism that challenged the hegemonic power (Downing, 2001; Khan & Kellner, 2005). This kind of challenge indicates sense of "network struggle" (Liu, 2013), since all kinds of power relations or "war"—to use Foucault's (2004) metaphor—"tend to be netwars (Hardt & Negri, 2004: p. 55)". It is increasingly obvious that China Internet has become one of the most effective and popular channels for network struggle, where "creativity, communication, and self-organized cooperation are its primary values (Hardt & Negri, 2004: p. 83)." And if power is "circulated through networks" (Foucault, 2004: p. 29), so is resistance, because resistance is not something external to, or separate from, power relations, both of them coexisting as a network of fluid, mobile, unstable and agonistic forces (Foucault, 1990). In China Internet Jianghu, as showed in this case, this kind of resistance takes advantage of Internet's hypertextuality and visual opportunities to conduct alternative discussion, circulate alternative information, mobilize protest actions, organize subcultural groups, as well as produce alternative knowledge (Liu, 2013). Even though these network struggles are not about seizing power or controlling a political decision-making process—in this case, for example, the resistance is targeted on the result of judgment, not the political system that caused this tragedy—they have expressed the emotion of disobedience and refusal "to be ruled in such manners" (Foucault, 2007).

Some netizens even extended the online actions to the offline real life world, launching "performance arts" with the themes of "Everyone Could Be Deng" and "Who Will Be the Next Deng" (**Figure 3**):

This kind of offline performance arts, shows new colorful political phenomenon, named "performing protest" (Huang Zhenhui, 2011) or "contentious performance" (Tilly, 2008). Mainly based on the "weapon of the weak" (Scott, 1985)—however, the weapon here was the body of the weak, and the transcript is "public transcript" rather than "hidden transcript" (Scott, 1985)—the subaltern people perform "justice resistance" (Yang, 2009) spontaneously, implicitly and scatteredly, through which "realpolitiks of resistance" (Comaroff 1985) and "infrapolitics" (Scott, 1985) are formed. This sort of "network struggle" through the performance of actions, offers what Foucault calls the "means of escape" and "continuation of war by other means" (Foucault, 2004; Liu, 2013), and also demonstrates the agency of the "tactical" response of the weak to the "strategy" of the powerful (de Certeau, 1984). But it also exposes the limitations and ambiguity of the subaltern politics. It tends to avoid direct and severe confrontation against the elite norms, or to challenge the state power (Yu Jianrong, 2008), but on the contrary, may even strengthen the state power or the party (Hachigian, 2001; Huang Zhenhui, 2011).

Meanwhile, it was also worth noting that the Event of Deng Yujiao has quickly formed a network "public opinion field" (Liu Jianming, 2002) and interacted with the traditional media quite well, which gave an chance for the public opinion fields of the new media and traditional media to form a certain kind of interaction synergistically, creating a new mechanism of public opinion forming. At the same time, this "public opinion field" also exerted enormous pressure to the government and the court during the trial process, which made it possible that the Supreme Court exempted criminal punishment from Deng. To some extent, this "public opinion field" helped to influence the government and court's decision-making, which has long been expected by democratic public sphere, implicating a possibility of alternative public sphere's eliminating its "alternative".

**Figure 3.** Everyone could be Deng, source: Sina,
http://ent.sina.com.cn/bbs/2009/1210/183918905.html

## 5. Discussion: Power of the Spectatorship, Eyes of the People

By Event of South China Tiger Photos, we have interpreted "egao" as "culture jamming", as "carnival culture", as "political statement" of "critique", as "discourse of truth" of "the politics of truth"; by Event of Deng Yujiao, we have interpreted "tragic literature" and "performance arts" as "network struggle", as "justice resistance", as "realpolitiks of resistance", as "infrapolitics".

However, even with these interpretations, we still have to point out that China Internet is reluctant to create a traditional sense of "democratic public sphere", because it only passively leads to an "alternative public sphere" in Chinese sense of Jianghu, which does not directly touch the core governance issues of the party-state machine, and even keep a safe distance or ambiguous relationship with the ruling power. But this notion does not mean that the "alternative public sphere" has nothing to do with "democracy", since even though "alternative public sphere" itself is not "democratic public sphere", it has its own sense of "alternative democracy" in its specific context. Accordingly, we would employ another notion of *weiguan* 围观 ("spectatorship")—which literally means "to surround and watch"—to illustrate the implication of "alternative democracy" of the "alternative public sphere" in Chinese context.

Both of the two events have showed us the "power of the spectatorship". As South China Weekly's famous article asserts: "Attention is Power, Spectatorship Changes China (Xiao Shu, 2010)." This title comes out to be the slogan of the age of Web 2.0 in China, characterized by the prevalence of Sina micro-blogs. The words "spectatorship" and "spectator"—which literally means weiguan and *kanke* 看客 in Chinese—have its own roots in Lu Xun's 鲁迅 writings, where they are regarded as the villainy of Chinese people. The meanings of spectatorship or weiguan, however, have been reversed from the weakness and villainy of the people in the Lu Xun's writings to the power and glory of people in the cyberspace. Just as Xiao (2010) argues, we are in a totally different era, an era of spectatorship. In the past, we could only whisper and complain, neither of which could change China, because no matter how much we complained and whispered, the evil were still evil. In the age of Internet, however, we have witnessed great progress that we can not only whisper and complain, but also surround and watch, acting as spectators rather than whispers or complainers. Thanks to the spectatorship of netizens, a new public opinion field, as kind of new public sphere, has already landed in China, together with a huge amount of private views and intellectual resources. In fact, it is a new public sphere that can assemble hundreds of millions of people in the same crowd, making judgments, taking actions and deciding choices, quietly, peacefully, and progressively. These judgments, actions and choices are not made based on "rationality", but on *liangzhi* 良知("conscience"), just like what we have seen in Event of Deng Yujiao. Every mouse click of the spectators is a resounding drum, coming from all directions, turning into a spectacular symphony of our era. That is the power of the spectators, that hundreds of millions of people surrounding, watching, and focusing, turning out their spectatorship to be the world's largest searchlight on the darkness.

"The power of spectatorship", as illustrated by both of these two cases, from Jacques Rancière (2011) point of view, empowers "the emancipated spectator" and chants "the capacity of anonymous people": "That is what the word 'emancipation' means: the blurring of the boundary between those who act and those who look; between individuals and members of a collective body (Rancière, 2011: p. 19)." China netizens in these two cases are no

longer passive individual lookers or consumers who are separated from "both the capacity to know and the power to act (Rancière, 2011: p. 2)", but active collective actors and producers that have their own power and tactics to resist the ruling power. In other words, the passive audience or spectators has been transformed into its opposite, into an active body of community enacting its living principle (Rancière, 2011: p. 5). Here, the evaluation of spectatorship can be referred into the status of a gaze, especially Sartre's notion of the existential gaze, or le regard, which Sartre uses to empower the spectator as the holder of the gaze with the capacity to undermine the agency of another rather than a merely passive figure (Green, 2009). Now, "Being a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity. It is our normal situation. We also learn and teach, act and know, as spectators who all the time link what we see to what we have seen and said, done and dreamed. There is no more a privileged form than there is a privileged starting point (Rancière, 2011: p. 16-17)."

Therefore, it could be "a privileged starting point" for us to imagine democracy in an age of spectatorship, as Green (2009) argues: "it is possible to do democratic theory from the spectator's perspective: that there are understandings of citizenship, popular power, and democratic progress that can be worked out from the standpoint of the political spectator (p. 6)." To some extent, people's eyes as an organ have properly functioned as a site of popular empowerment because spectators now are related to politics with eyes, and accordingly, spectatorship has become an ocular model of popular power and democracy that grounds on the people's eyes and capacity for vision, rather than on the people's voice and capacity for speech—a vocal model of democracy (Green, 2009). Compared with the previous vocal model, the spectatorship ocular model owns the aesthetic value of eventfulness, the egalitarian value of Machiavellianism for the people, and the solidarity value of the recovery of the concept of the people. As we can see from the two cases we discussed above, or other Internet events in China: the term "Internet Event" itself exactly connotes the eventfulness; the objects of these events—most of which are for the interests of the people—implicate the Machiavellianism for the people; the subjects of these events—the netizens—show the egalitarian value as well as the solidarity value of recovery of the concept of the people as netizens. By upholding these values as moral value, actually, the spectatorship ocular model appeals to the relation between spectatorship and morality that Kant—or Lu Xun in China—first identifies, but from the opposite direction (Green, 2009: p. 22).

Even though democracy hitherto has been conceived as an empowerment of the people's voice, creating traditional vocal model of democracy—like the "democratic public sphere"—relating to politics with voices, we have to point out that China Internet Jianghu, as an "alternative public sphere", has its own sense of "alternative democracy", relating to politics with eyes, creating new ocular model of democracy, a "alternative model" which can be related to a forgotten alternative within democratic theory—the school of thought known as "plebiscitary democracy".

## 6. Coda: From Outlaw to Revolt, Both Suppression and Amnesty

Now we have interpreted China Internet Jianghu as "alternative public sphere" through discussions of its cultural practice, including "culture jamming", "carnival culture", "political statement" of "critique", "discourse of truth" of "the politics of truth", "network struggle", "justice resistance", "realpolitiks of resistance", "infrapolitics" etc. We have also pointed out that this "alternative public sphere" is not "vocal model" of "democratic public sphere", but "ocular model" of "alternative democracy" that based on specific Chinese context of "power of the spectatorship, eyes of the people". From a cultural studies perspective, this study aimed to provide new imagination on public sphere and democracy with Chinese characteristics, opening possible space for further studies. Besides this theoretical concern, however, the practical reality of the alternative public sphere is also worthy of our concern and discussion.

On the one hand, there is a trend of "from outlaw to revolt" (*cong zhangyi dao qiyi* 从仗义到起义). China is now on the period of "great transition" (Wang Shaoguang, 2008), rendering the contemporary China into a conflicting and contentious society (Tilly, 2008). The explosion of the accumulated conflicts and contentions in the "great transition" era meets with the development of the Internet in China, rendering the articulation and resonance between Internet events and social events. The "virtual public sphere" (Papacharissi, 2002) and "weak public sphere" (Fraser, 1992) begin to "substantialize" and "strengthen", since the originally individuals begin to converge on the Internet, automatically and unconsciously, actively and passively, to act as a collective, a mob, or a crowd that is sometimes impulsively, irritable and irrational (Le Bon, 1986). Their "focus" on the independent events will always "zoom" to the public issues of social inequality, government corruption, wealth gap, etc. This trend of "from outlaw to revolt", according to Ernesto Laclau (2005), is a "hegemonic function" of the

equivalence of particularistic demands. The "focuses" on the independent events are usually particularistic demands under the "logic of difference", since each of these demands, in its particularity, is different from all the others. All of them, however, are equivalent to each other in their common opposition to the status quo or the ruling power. Therefore, there is a possibility that one particular demand—government credibility, for example—takes up an incommensurable universal signification and assumes the representation of an incommensurable totality. In other words, one specific demand may become an "empty signifier" to homogenize all the particular demands into an "equivalent chain" under the "logic of equivalence", and assume the order of "hegemonic identity" or "popular identity" to challenge an enemy on the opposite of the frontier (Laclau, 2005). Now they are no longer satisfied with the "instantaneous contraction and release of collective movement" (Li Yonggang, 2009) that "begin with instantaneous satisfaction, and end with instantaneous oblivion" (Xu Zhiyuan, 2008), but upholding independent claims to systematic appeals. For example, in Event of South China Tiger Photos, the independent claims of the "true or fake" of the tiger photos are ultimately "political statement" and "politics of truth" towards government's credibility and legitimacy.

One the other hand, this trend of "from outlaw to revolt" is still in its embryo, but the encountered ruling power has been in so much dread that they begin to take severe actions, "both suppression and amnesty" (*taofa yu zhao'an* 讨伐与招安). First of all, it is the head-on confrontation and suppression, mainly based on the "totalitarian regime" on dimension of laws and regulations, and "virtual to real, passive to stereo" supervision system on dimension of space and technique (Li Yonggang, 2009). Secondly, the government also offers amnesty and enlistment to rebels, covertly and gradually. Its function mechanism is mainly based on the "Affirmation-Repetition-Contagion" principle (Le Bon, 1986), and "the spiral of silence" (Noelle-Neumann, 1984), using the hired Internet commentators—the so-called *wu mao dang* 五毛党 ("Fifty Cents Party")—to post comments favorable towards government in an attempt to shape and sway public opinion online and make the dissent opinion into oblivion. Holding high the flag of patriotism and cyber nationalism (Wu, 2007), the ruling power covertly and gradually offers amnesty and enlistment to some of the rebels in order to recruit them under the flag of *daguo jueqi* 大国崛起 ("rise of China") and *minzu fuxing* 民族复兴 ("national rejuvenation"), against the Jianghu style flag of *titian xingdao* 替天行道 ("enforce justice on behalf of Heaven"). In Laclau's words, some of the signifiers' meanings are "suspended" and become "floating signifiers", since the opposite ruling regime itself is trying to interrupt the popular camp's "equivalential chain" by an alternative equivalential chain, in which some of the popular demands are articulated to entirely different links—"rise of China" and "national rejuvenation", for example—and the "dichotomic frontier", without disappearing, is blurred as a result of the opposite regime itself becoming hegemonic (Laclau, 2005: p. 131). This new rival hegemonic project propose structural pressure on particular democratic demands—"with us or against us, that is a choice"—to some extent, the netizens as a whole have been divided into two opposing sides, the "Fifty Cents Party" and the *mei gou* 美狗 ("American Dogs"), dissolving the Internet dissent power through the internal conflicts and struggles of the "smart mobs" (Rheingold, 2002), staggering the challenge and threaten towards the ruling power.

The trend of "from outlaw to revolt", as illustrated in the Event of Deng Yujiao, implicates some possible routes for the alternative public sphere to "de-alternative". However, "both suppression and amnesty", on the other side, warns signs of dissolving power towards this alternative public sphere. Further discussion of these two sides may offer some new thoughts on our study on the emergence of the alternative public sphere.

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