

[Christopher R. Hughes](#)

## Nationalism in Chinese cyberspace

**Article (Accepted version)  
(Refereed)**

**Original citation:**

Hughes, Christopher R. (2000) Nationalism in Chinese cyberspace. [Cambridge review of international affairs](#), 13 (2). pp. 195-209.

DOI: [10.1080/09557570008400309](https://doi.org/10.1080/09557570008400309)

© 2000 [Taylor and Francis](#)

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/7013/>

Available in LSE Research Online: March 2009

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's final manuscript accepted version of the journal article, incorporating any revisions agreed during the peer review process. Some differences between this version and the published version may remain. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

# Nationalism in Chinese Cyberspace

**Christopher Rene Hughes**

This article takes reactions to atrocities committed against ethnic Chinese during the riots that swept Indonesia in May 1998 as a case study by which to analyse the politics of nationalism in Chinese cyberspace. By focusing on Chinese website activity during the weeks that led up to an unauthorised demonstration to the Indonesian embassy by students from Peking University, it provides insights into how the internet can be used for disseminating information, organising political action and expressing dissent in an authoritarian society. It concludes, however, that this case combined with more recent examples, indicates that cyber-politics is more likely to be used to promote nationalism than liberal-democracy, the former being far more difficult to suppress than the latter for a regime whose legitimacy depends increasingly on nationalist claims.

Links between computers in the PRC and abroad were first used to disseminate information about a large-scale political movement during the events surrounding the Tiananmen Massacre of 4 June 1989. At that time, just over a year after the sending of China's first e-mail overseas in September 1987,<sup>1</sup> such activity was limited mainly to computer literate personnel in scientific research institutes. Since then, however, the PRC has been connected to the Internet proper, Chinese software has become widely available, and Chinese search engines have proliferated. The latest figures from the PRC state that there are 8.9 million Internet users. As cyberspace is borderless, though, we should also include among its Chinese reading inhabitants large numbers of internet users among the 22 million Chinese speakers in Taiwan, the 6 million in Hong Kong, and the 38 million people of Chinese ethnicity who are mainly concentrated outside the PRC in Southeast Asia, North American and Australia.

This expansion of Chinese cyberspace<sup>2</sup> has created an increasingly popular arena for political activity. Internet services located outside the PRC, such as the US-based 'VIP Reference' and 'Tunnel', make it their mission to promote freedom of information by bombarding hundreds of thousands of mainland Chinese email addresses with electronic newsletters that include essays and debates on democratic politics and news of arrests of dissidents.<sup>3</sup> More popular, however, has been the politics of nationalism.

Sometimes this has taken the form of transnational campaigns for action to defend the motherland, as in the campaign to defend the Japanese occupied but Chinese-claimed Diaoyutai/Senkaku archipelago that was revived during the 1990s.

As opponents of the CCP regime have discovered that nationalism constitutes a powerful criticism for an authoritarian regime that legitimates its rule in increasingly nationalistic terms, even the websites of organisations such as the United Democrats of Hong Kong have promoted causes such as the ‘defend the Diaoyutai’ movement. Also symptomatic of this symbiotic relationship between democracy and nationalism in Chinese politics is the way that one of the main features of the ‘VIP Reference’ website, set up by Chinese students in the USA and Canada at the time of Tiananmen to disseminate news information in Chinese cyberspace, is a virtual museum of the atrocities committed by the Japanese during the Nanjing Massacre of 1937.<sup>4</sup>

It is in this context of a rapidly expanding and politicised Chinese cyberspace that one of the most interesting political movements on the Internet occurred in the summer of 1998. The trigger was the riots that swept Jakarta on 13-15 May 1998, in the wake of the Asian financial crisis. Investigations by human rights groups soon began to reveal that a disproportionate number of the victims of violence that had occurred were ethnic Chinese Indonesians, singled out as part of a what looked like a systematic campaign of persecution in which the military and police authorities were complicit.<sup>5</sup> What caused particular indignation was that many of the victims had been ethnic Chinese women, of all ages, who had been subjected to gang rape, often in front of their families.<sup>6</sup>

Demonstrations by ethnic Chinese groups in the various southeast Asian states, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and as far away as Australia and the United States quickly followed.<sup>7</sup> Mainland China was the stark exception, with demonstrations remaining conspicuously absent. However, as rumours of more planned atrocities appeared on the Internet during the run-up to Indonesian Independence Day, 17 August, demonstrations did finally take place in Beijing. These culminated in a march to the Indonesian embassy by students from Peking University.

Through analysing messages posted on BBS pages from correspondents at Peking University between August and September 1998, this article argues that the Internet provided an important medium in bringing the 17 August demonstration about.<sup>8</sup> First of all it provided the conduit for disseminating information about what was going on in Indonesia. Equally important was that the Internet also provided a channel for publicising information about the organisation of the demonstration in Beijing and news about how the attitude of the authorities to the movement. Most significant for Chinese

politics, though, was the way in which the internet became a site for expressing dissent by calling into question the nationalist credentials of the CCP after the Beijing authorities refused to grant permission for the demonstration to take place.

#### *Dissemination of information from abroad*

In the months following the May atrocities, many BBS correspondents complained that the Chinese press itself had not kept them informed of events in Indonesia. They managed to supplement the limited coverage inside the PRC, however, by the posting of large numbers of detailed bulletins and analyses from web sites outside the country. Chinese translations appeared from agencies such as the Associated Press, Agence France Press, Reuters, and the Voice of America as well as from the press in Taiwan and Hong Kong. The websites of major Indonesian newspapers such as *Republika*, *Suara Pembaruan*, and the Indonesian Antara News Agency, were also available for scrutiny. Thanks to access to such web sites, surfers inside mainland China could stay informed as events unfolded in Indonesia.

In-depth analysis and discussion on the position of the ethnic Chinese in Indonesian society was also provided by the transmission of Chinese versions of long articles from the Indonesian press. These included moving descriptions of the identity crisis that had been forced on the Chinese-Indonesians by the atrocities and the way that their faith in Indonesian tolerance and integration had been destroyed. They also included criticism of the way in which the Indonesian government used the media to make the Chinese scapegoats and portray them as selfish and unwilling to integrate, and how exclusion by the Malay majority has made such integration impossible.<sup>9</sup> Further evidence of the negative attitude of the Indonesian authorities was forthcoming in reports of statements by Indonesian officials, such as the speech by the mayor of Jakarta, H. Andi S. Abdullah, who, on 18 May, told a meeting of Chinese-Indonesians that they should 'learn a lesson' from the events, namely that they should not use money to buy their way out of community responsibilities, not pretend to be Muslims and not keep themselves apart from the community.<sup>10</sup> The international press, too, were criticised for the way in which they implied the Chinese-Indonesians were in part responsible for their own fate because of their economic success, which they had never implied in cases like Rwanda and the Balkans.<sup>11</sup>

The information that most directly inflamed Chinese anger, though, was the news about mass rapes and the harrowing accounts of victims. This began to appear on 8 July, after the release of the results of the investigation into sexual assaults by the *Komisi Nasional Hak Asasi Manusia Indonesia* (Indonesian National Commission on

Human Rights), relayed onto the Internet by the Indonesian newspaper *Media Indonesia*. At the same time, personal stories and graphic evidence was posted on the Internet by correspondents claiming to be Chinese-Indonesian women seeking help. Organisations such as The Contemporary Women's Foundation (*Xiandai Funu Jijin Hui*) in Taiwan, collected pictures showing scenes of rape and genital mutilation, in which men in military uniform could be seen taking part. The Chinese Indonesian Rescue Society (*Yini Huayi Qiujiu Xiehui*), also in Taiwan, reported that on 2 July an Indonesian woman had been gang raped and a metal pole had been rammed into her vagina because she was suspected of revealing the atrocities by email.<sup>12</sup> Particularly influential was the serialisation in late July of the diary of an 18-year-old Chinese-Indonesian girl, Wei Wei An, by an international protestant organisation (*Jidujiao Lingxiu Lianhe Hui*), which told the harrowing story of how she and her female relatives had been gang raped by 9 men shouting 'Allah is Great' and 'Let's eat these pigs'. Just before the attack, they had heard the cries of a 12-year-old girl next door screaming 'Mama, mama it hurts!' as she fell victim to the gang.<sup>13</sup>

There was an immediate response from Chinese women's groups outside mainland China. On 26 and 27 July demonstrations were held in Taiwan and Hong Kong as women vented their anger and demanded more action from their own governments and the UN to protect Chinese-Indonesians. Women's groups in Taiwan even demanded that their government should freeze loans to Jakarta and allow victims of the rapes to go to Taiwan for medical treatment.<sup>14</sup> When news spread that, in the run up to Indonesian Independence Day, plans were afoot to rape Indonesian-Chinese women and emasculate Indonesian-Chinese men, calls went out on Taiwan BBS pages to hack into and sabotage Indonesian government computers, boycott Indonesian goods and tourism and expel the Indonesian representative in Taipei (the equivalent of 'ambassador' in Taiwan's unorthodox foreign relations).<sup>15</sup>

Although there were no demonstrations inside Mainland China, BBS pages there also encouraged Chinese hackers to attack Indonesian computer systems. In August a 'Chinese hackers' manifesto' was posted on the Internet, which read: 'The Chinese must not be cowardly again! Use violence to fight violence, defend the great name of China to the end, of course the Chinese are the greatest race in the world, Chinese culture will ultimately spread to the world, I firmly believe it.'<sup>16</sup> Information about how to make successful attacks was disseminated by internet users who claimed to be working on internet security,<sup>17</sup> as were notices telling surfers which Indonesian sites had been blacked out so that they could take a look for themselves.<sup>18</sup>

Apart from hacking, BBS pages also provided a space within which individuals

could express the distress and anger they experienced after reading news of atrocities. Typical of this was a long message posted by 'bao', describing himself as an unmarried man living an ordinary life, who had become unable to sleep because he was haunted by the cries of children shouting 'Mama, it hurts!'.

For someone like 'bao', the Internet became a place to vent his nationalist frustration, asking:

My mother country, do you hear the crying? Your children abroad are crying out. Help them. I do not understand politics and do not dare talk about politics. I do not know what it means to say 'we have no long-term friends or enemies, only long term interests', and I do not know what these interests are ... I only know that my own compatriots are being barbarously slaughtered, they need help, and not just moral expressions of understanding and concern. My motherland, they are your children. The blood that flows from their bodies is the blood of the Han race. Their sincerity and good will also comes from your nourishment. Help them ...¡¥

What upset 'bao's' patriotism most of all, though, was that he had heard a Chinese Indonesian say that the first safe haven abroad that he would send his children to was not the Chinese motherland, but the United States, 'that place that we like to call the world policeman, like to call the hegemonic power'.<sup>19</sup>

### *Organising political action*

As news of the Indonesian atrocities spread through Chinese cyberspace, the internet started to be used as part of efforts to try to organise in mainland China the kind of protests that had been held by Chinese groups abroad. The first sign that Peking University students were planning to hold a demonstration came on 10 August, when news was relayed on BBS sites that the campus research and student committees there had put up a poster to announce that they were applying for permission to demonstrate. A notice also appeared stating that three student representatives had applied for permission at the local branch of the Public Security Bureau, only to be told to make a more formal application to the Beijing City Public Security Bureau instead.<sup>20</sup> News was also relayed that a representative of the Peking University Communist Youth League had attended a meeting of between 100 and 200 students, and promised to tell them if the organisation would support a demonstration after he had made a report.<sup>21</sup>

News of how the authorities were reacting to other demonstrations did not give the organisers much room for optimism, however. One report told how plainclothes police

had filmed a demonstration at the Indonesian Embassy on 10 August held by some 200 Beijing citizens, including known dissidents.<sup>22</sup> Another correspondent reported that staff at multinational companies such as IBM, Motorola and Oracle, who had been following the Indonesian events on the web, had been refused permission to deliver a letter to the Indonesian embassy. Although the police had expressed sympathy with the would-be demonstrators, the Foreign Ministry had blocked their request, on the grounds that Indonesia was facing a difficult time in its domestic and foreign affairs.<sup>23</sup>

An ominous sign that the Peking University authorities would also try to prevent any protest appeared when news was posted on the internet that the triangular area of the campus where students hold meetings and put up posters, was being filled up with mounds of 'rotten' books and letters praising the handling of the floods that were sweeping the country that summer.<sup>24</sup> Most worrying for the Peking students, though, was a BBS report that appeared on 15 August informing them that leaders of a demonstration from neighbouring Qinghua University had been dispersed before it started, leaving only around 40-50 students to take part.<sup>25</sup>

A growing enthusiasm for defiance became increasingly evident in the messages that appeared after 10 August. Authors expressed their anger by developing puns, replacing the Chinese characters for embassy (dashiguan), with homophones meaning 'coffin' or 'shit can'. Old nationalist slogans from the past were also attached to messages concerning the despatch of the student delegation to the Public Security Bureau, such as 'Stop Japanese goods, use national goods!'<sup>26</sup> Messages that relayed information about pressure put on the 10 August dissident demonstration were accompanied by short exclamations, such as 'Angry!!! Let people express their rage!!!' Indignant responses were also made to any questioning of the seriousness of the students to march. 'Of course we are going!' exclaimed 'hejie'. I have even prepared the banners. (Only I do not know how many will turn up on the day). Never mind, go direct or go straight to the South Gate of Peking University and it will be OK'. 'The students might be young', agreed 'cdt', 'but they are also brave', adding the comment in reply to sceptics, 'I worry that one day I might not be able to stop myself having your kind of feelings. What is the difference between that and being dead?'<sup>27</sup>

The worst fears of the students were confirmed when the day of the planned protest, 17 August, finally arrived. News quickly spread by Internet that a notice announcing that permission to march had not been granted had been pinned up on campus. The refusal had been justified by the excuse that the country was preoccupied with efforts to control the devastating floods of that summer, and that a demonstration might also provoke the Indonesians to commit more atrocities.<sup>28</sup> What made matters

even worse was that an AP cable from Jakarta appeared on the internet on 17 August which reported that the PRC government had actually agreed to give medical aid worth US\$ 3 million to Indonesia and extend US\$ 200 million of export credit.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the ban on the protest, however, one-line messages continued to appear on the morning of 17 August, encouraging people to participate and to pass on the word to those who did not know. 'Blood has already flowed', exclaimed 'nobody!abc'. 'Crying out is no help. Everyone with a conscience, take your courage, the students need your support!!!!!! This evening some students have already been interrogated by security and forced to promise they will not demonstrate. The atmosphere at PKU is extremely tense, people are being "looked for" everywhere. This then is our government.'<sup>30</sup>

The following day first-hand accounts of how the demonstration had been frustrated began to appear. One correspondent described how he had woken early and made his way to the Triangle to find a mere handful of students there. When he proceeded to the meeting place at the South Gate, he was confronted by plainclothes policemen who told him to forget about demonstrating and to go and do some studying instead. He had another look at 9.00am and saw that nobody was around, and that the Qinghua 'second line' had also collapsed into nothing.<sup>31</sup>

Another correspondent did get to the embassy, only to discover that building work was being carried out opposite. About 50 students were quietly sitting some distance away, behind a line of police, looking more like victims of an anti-pornography campaign than righteous demonstrators. Pedestrians were not permitted to pass, and cyclists were not allowed to stop.<sup>32</sup>

According to one account, the students did apparently hold negotiations with the police and the campus authorities at a military-police hospital near the embassy, at which they complained that it was useless to try to use official channels. Four of them had finally been allowed to deliver a protest letter, re-emerging from the embassy to applause from the public. When they produced a banner written in English, though, it had been rapidly confiscated.<sup>33</sup>

### *Dissent*

Not a lot of weight can be given to the official reasons for refusing the students permission to demonstrate. The floods that year were indeed serious, but they did not touch Beijing, and it is hard to see how a student demonstration could have dramatically worsened relations between the PRC and Indonesia. Instead, the ban should be understood in the context of the clamp down on independent political activity in the capital that had been in place since the Tiananmen Massacre of 4 June 1989. The protest



movement that had been crushed in 1989 had in fact framed its calls for reform of the CCP dictatorship largely in patriotic terms. In doing so, it was locating itself in the tradition of a patriotic movement that started as far back as 4 May 1919, when students had marched to protest against the failure of their government to stand up for Chinese interests at Versailles.<sup>34</sup>

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s the CCP had attacked its Nationalist civil war opponents for their failure to unite and defend the motherland from imperialist aggression. They had thus come to power and won popular legitimacy largely because they could claim to be the saviours of the nation. Any questioning of the CCP's nationalist credentials is, therefore, a far more effective attack on their claim to political legitimacy than complaints made about the lack of democracy. This has been even more so the case since the crisis of faith in Marxism that began after the Cultural Revolution and has only intensified after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is not surprising, then, that when demonstrations by Chinese groups outside the mainland have occurred over nationalist incidents, they have been suppressed in Beijing itself, a point not lost on some of the frustrated BBS correspondents in August 1998.<sup>35</sup>

When people began to take to the streets after the Indonesian atrocities, that the CCP dictatorship could become the subject of criticism quickly became apparent. Internet reports of the dissident demonstration on 10 August, for example, explained that the marchers had delivered a letter to the Indonesian embassy complained that Beijing had responded weakly to the atrocities, instead of exerting firm diplomatic pressure on Jakarta and establishing reception centres on Chinese territory for refugees. More obliquely, the letter also insisted that only democratic government could protect the rights of all citizens.

News of accusations that Beijing's response had been 'luke warm' also began to appear on the Internet as the Peking University demonstration was being organised. Sometimes the source for such dissent came from overseas reports. According one AP report relayed by 'mize' at PKU, information sent via the internet to the Information Centre of the Chinese Human Rights and Democracy Movement in New York claimed that posters had been put up on the Peking University campus directing special criticism at the Foreign Ministry and the Chinese media. The Foreign Ministry was singled out because it was supposed to have used the fact that the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia are not PRC citizens as an excuse for inaction. The generally 'numb' official attitude towards the atrocities was seen by the students as 'revealing the lack of feelings of the system of dictatorship'. Predicting that the dissatisfaction would grow, the centre had announced its intention to use its BBS to facilitate further debate.<sup>36</sup>

This simmering frustration over the conservative attitude of the authorities turned to anger when news finally broke that permission to demonstrate had been refused. 'This kind of thing is always without permission, it is unbelievable!!!' exclaimed a correspondent going by the name of 'tandon'. To which 'mercy' added the comment, 'It would only be unbelievable if it had been given permission'.<sup>37</sup> Another, 'Cyclone', vented his/her anger by stating, 'God (in English), we even have no right to demonstrate, its pitiable (in Chinese)!!! Is it that they are afraid we will influence the "friendly relations" between the two countries?'.<sup>38</sup> 'It is quite simple', pointed out 'realharlem', 'You can demonstrate against the atrocities in Indonesia, but as soon as you demonstrate a bit about democracy, freedom, lack of human rights, government incompetence, official corruption, then how can the CCP and the "collective leadership around the core of Jiang Zemin" accept it?'.<sup>39</sup>

The official reasons for refusing permission began to be treated with contempt. 'Aiding with the floods is an obligation, demonstrating is our right', exclaimed 'ericlin' on the day after the demonstration. 'The government has messed things up, when it wants your help then it has a warm and sincere face. When you want to say a little of your own opinion, then it becomes unfathomable and even wont let you talk. The students have been completely wronged and made fools of. If you do not let me enjoy my rights, why should I fulfill my obligations?'.<sup>40</sup> Ridiculing Jiang Zemin's recent 'Three Talks' (*san jiang*) propaganda campaign to promote selfless patriotic morality, 'micheals' sarcastically commented, 'Ha ha, we have really forgotten what studying is for ... the leadership tells us to advocate the Three Talks, while the children called "Indonesia"' next door are stirring things up. You can fix the gutter in your idiot's room. Let's fix it then. Listening is most simple, studying is really useless! Don't think about it, save your worries!'.<sup>41</sup>

As the anger grew, the CCP's patriotism increasingly became the focus of overt criticism. 'Ah!' exclaimed 'dgione', 'The country is backward, the government is weak and the citizens are bitterly disappointed. Moreover, the BBSs are now being closed. Why ask everyone to talk only about patriotism, when talking about love of the people leads to the closure of the BBSs? Is patriotism really so difficult? Is it that one can only give one's heart to patriotism when far away overseas?? The country is so big, at the same time as controlling the floods, cannot the rest of the citizens take part in international politics and express their emotions. It is really interesting. Is it that 1.2 billion people cannot block the Yangtze?'.<sup>42</sup>

Point-by-point criticisms of the ways in which Beijing had responded to the atrocities provided what looked like good evidence for questioning the CCP's patriotic

credentials. On 14 August, for example, 'independent observer' posted a message asking why it had taken two months from the beginning of the atrocities before they had become known in China via the web.<sup>43</sup> 'Hss' directed criticism at the PRC's strong stance on non-intervention, asking how the Arab states would react if China started to kill its Muslim citizens and pointed out that France and the United States had intervened in Rwanda. The PRC, however, had not used its seat at the UN to promote sanctions, had taken part in IMF aid to Indonesia while straining under its own domestic problems, and had stopped public demonstrations even though the situation was very different from 1989.<sup>44</sup>

'Whg (white horse)' compared this weak reaction with the way in which the British and Americans always stand together, added a warning that the tendency for some Chinese to believe in western-style cosmopolitanism would be extremely dangerous in an age characterised increasingly by conflicts between nations and religions.<sup>45</sup> Equally serious for the credibility of the CCP were complaints about its betrayal of the overseas Chinese, upon whom it had frequently called to return and invest in the mainland since the beginning of 'reform and opening' in 1979.<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps most sensitive of all was that Taiwan began to be brought into the issue. One lengthy article by a certain Zhang Weiguo, posted by 'moveon' with the comment 'a load of claptrap', contrasted the weak attitude taken by Beijing towards Indonesia with the strong stance it had taken towards Taiwan during the run-up to the island's first presidential election in March 1996.<sup>47</sup> Even more damning was the accusation that Taipei had taken a much stronger stance towards Jakarta, announcing on 20 August that in reaction to public outrage in Taiwan it had suspended negotiations with the Indonesians and the supply of 200,000 tons of rice.

ROC foreign minister Jason Hu, pointed out a correspondent claiming to be a Chinese political scientist in the United States, had also issued a five point statement of concern to the Indonesian representative in Taipei. In contrast, PRC foreign minister, Tang Jiaxuan, representing Beijing which was so fond of advocating 'great nationalism and that blood is thicker than water', was accused of giving a green light for the atrocities by issuing a statement when he visited Jakarta in April 1998 that stressed that the fate of ethnic Chinese Indonesians was a domestic affair for Indonesia to handle alone. The reason for this, claimed the political scientist, was the common 'Asian values' espoused by Jakarta and Beijing, according to which both regimes were prepared to use violence as a means of government and to trample on the human rights of their citizens.<sup>48</sup>

*The virtual reality of politics in cyberspace*

It has been proposed above that, during the events surrounding the August 17 demonstration by Peking University students, the Internet was a useful conduit for allowing people in an authoritarian society to keep informed about developments abroad, organise political action and express dissent. However, to assess the true nature of this activity, we should remember that politics in cyberspace has its own distinct characteristics. First of all, much of the information that makes its way into 'virtual reality' is unreliable. For example, some of the pictures of atrocities against Chinese-Indonesian women that were posted on a web site for overseas Chinese<sup>49</sup> turned out to be photographs of outrages committed elsewhere and at other times.<sup>50</sup> Yet it is perhaps precisely the ease with which virtual reality can be manipulated that makes it ripe for the politics of mobilisation. What has been shown above is how the object of such mobilisation rapidly changed from the situation in Indonesia to criticism of the CCP regime in the PRC itself.

How this manipulation of reality came about can be seen in the way that many of the accusations that were levied against the response of the PRC government to the Indonesian crisis were calculated to be highly embarrassing for the Party leadership, but did not actually have much relationship either to the historical sequence of events or to the complexity of the situation abroad.<sup>51</sup> The statement made by PRC foreign minister Tang Jiaxuan during his April visit to Jakarta, which was later criticised on the Internet, was certainly cautious. However, it was made in the context of an awareness of Indonesian historical sensitivities about the possibility of Chinese intervention. This has been freshly underlined in April 1994 when Jakarta had accused Beijing of reverting to its past meddling in Indonesian affairs after the PRC Foreign Ministry had made a statement of concern over violence against ethnic Chinese during riots in Sumatra.<sup>52</sup> Despite this, as the situation deteriorated in Indonesia, the PRC Foreign Ministry did increase the strength of its statements in a carefully calibrated way, issuing a statement of concern on 14 May,<sup>53</sup> followed by a demand from Tang Jiaxuan that the Indonesian government should ensure the security of ethnic Chinese and find and punish those who had committed crimes against them.

In contrast to accusations made by BBS correspondents, the difference between Beijing's and Taipei's reactions to the atrocities was also quite small. The report on mass rapes did not appear until 8 July, and the shocking diary of Wei Wei An only appeared on the Internet at the end of July. Beijing responded to the reports with a Foreign Ministry statement of concern on 28 July, and foreign minister Tang Jiaxuan told his Indonesian counterpart at a meeting in Manila that his government was closely

watching how the perpetrators of atrocities would be punished and the safety of ethnic Chinese and their property assured. When Taipei began to react with stronger measures, on the other hand, it was the ethnic Chinese Indonesians themselves who called for restraint out of fear that such actions might make their own situation worse.<sup>54</sup> An investigation mission sent from Taiwan soon found that rather than bold diplomatic gestures that might please domestic pressure groups in Taipei, what the ethnic Chinese Indonesians wanted was more flexibility on allowing refugees to enter.<sup>55</sup>

It might be possible to speculate that the embarrassment caused for the CCP by accusations on the internet did prompt a gradual reassertion by Beijing of its interest in the fate of Chinese Indonesians between May and September 1998, especially when Vice Premier Qian Qichen made a conspicuous statement of concern at a PRC National Day reception held by the State Council's Office of Overseas Chinese Affairs in late September.<sup>56</sup> Yet the above observations also indicate how the politics that were being conducted in cyberspace had as much to do with the politics of Chinese nationalism as they did with the situation in Indonesia. By monopolising access to information, the PRC authorities laid themselves open to often unfounded accusations about their responses to the atrocities as people looked to the Internet for alternative sources of news. When they refused to grant permission for the demonstration, this attempt to shield the CCP from criticism merely encouraged the debate in cyberspace to focus even more on the Party's nationalist and democratic credentials. Eventually this criticism was even presented in terms of the decades old conflict between the CCP and the Chinese Nationalists in Taiwan.

### *Conclusion*

There is now ample evidence to suggest that Chinese cyberspace has become an important political arena. Much has been written on the potential of the Internet to spread democratisation.<sup>57</sup> The idea that the increasing porosity of borders to information flows will lead to democratisation has even been an important assumption behind US foreign policy towards the PRC since the end of the Cold War. However, despite the presence of Chinese websites dedicated to democratisation, by far the most popular campaigns in Chinese cyberspace to date have been linked to nationalist themes.

The case of the reaction to the Indonesian atrocities examined here is but one case. The most spectacular examples since then have been the mass attacks launched by Chinese hackers against perceived enemies of the PRC. In early August 1999, over 7,200 attacks were launched against public websites in Taiwan in reaction to the

statement on 9 July by ROC President Lee Teng-hui that relations between the island and the mainland are on a 'special state-to-state' basis, seen in mainland China as tantamount to a declaration of independence.<sup>58</sup> Taiwan's hackers quickly responded with eight waves of retaliation,<sup>59</sup> until the chaos threatened to become so great that calls for a ceasefire went out. Similar attacks were made against government websites in the United States following the missile attack on the PRC embassy in Belgrade on 8 May 1999.<sup>60</sup> When Japanese historians held a conference in Osaka in January 2000 that claimed the Nanjing Massacre was a fabrication, public websites in Japan were also attacked. At one point, some 1,600 strikes were launched within the space of seven minutes against the Bank of Japan's computer system.<sup>61</sup>

One of the problems in assessing the impact of such activities in cyberspace is that the motives and identities of its authors can be obscure. During the hacking war between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait, for example, it was even suggested that the motives of hackers were not so much concerned with politics as the wish to prove which side possesses most technological prowess. Most difficult, however, is deciding the relationship between Internet activity and the attitudes and actions of the PRC state. Regarding the organisation of demonstrations, for example, following the dispersal of the planned protest by Qinghua University students mentioned above, one BBS correspondent pointed out that the authorities might actually be encouraging people to rely on the web because it reduces the possibility of secret organisation.<sup>62</sup>

A more likely development than this is the increasing need for the state to align itself with the nationalistic outbursts that are becoming a regular occurrence in Chinese cyberspace. That the PRC state has found itself increasingly held hostage to an ideology that it has itself encouraged since the Tiananmen Massacre was evident when the authorities found themselves having to provide busses to ship demonstrators to the anti-NATO demonstrations held after the Belgrade bombing. There is plenty of evidence to indicate that the Internet played an important role in those events. It was via the Internet that news of the NATO attack was first spread. Aside from the street demonstrations that this triggered, there was also a massive burst of activity in cyberspace as views were posted on BBS sites, and information on how to hack into and disrupt foreign computer systems was spread. The reaction of the authorities this time was very different from their stance in the case of the Indonesian affair. Successful hacking attacks against United States government computers were reported with a degree of pride in party-controlled newspapers, which even printed addresses of US government websites.<sup>63</sup> Perhaps the final twist of irony, though, was that the very same Beijing municipal authorities that had tried to prevent autonomous protest activity following the

Indonesian atrocities actually set up a special ‘Sacred Sovereignty’ website on which people were encouraged to express their outrage over the Belgrade bombing, and from where they could obtain the email addresses of NATO governments and political parties.<sup>64</sup>

In light of all of the above evidence, it seems safe to say that Chinese cyberspace is an increasingly important arena for nationalist activity. There are also indications that the state is finding it increasingly necessary to align itself with such activity rather than face the kind of embarrassment that was generated by its reaction to the Indonesian crisis. The state may not feel quite so vulnerable when it comes to promoting democracy, where it has already put on trial individuals accused of using the internet to subvert social order.<sup>65</sup> The state can, after all, claim with some consistency and a degree of public support that its dictatorship is necessary to maintain the stability necessary for economic development. When it comes to nationalism, however, political activity is much more difficult to suppress for a party whose claim to legitimacy is expressed increasingly in nationalistic terms. It is difficult to see, therefore, how any of the Internet laws and regulations that have been enacted in the PRC could be used to stifle nationalist activity in cyberspace.

This point is important to bear in mind when the spread of the Internet is so central to the process of ‘globalisation’. From the examples looked at here, it would at least seem safe to conclude that there is no more reason to assume that the spread of the internet will lead to the spread of a particular liberal-democratic culture, any more than did the printed book. After all, as Anderson points out, print capitalism was one of the preconditions necessary for the age of nationalism to come about.<sup>66</sup> There is no obvious reason why Chinese cyberspace should not be just as amenable to the politics of nationalism.

---

<sup>1</sup>1. Under the title ‘Crossing the Great Wall to the World’, this message was sent over a local network, the China Computer Technology Net, to a German university net and finally to the International Science Net.

<sup>2</sup>2. ‘Chinese cyberspace’ will here be taken to mean computer-mediate relational spaces (borrowing from Jayne Rodgers, ‘NGOs – New Communications Technologies and Concepts of Political Community’,

---

*Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 12, No. 2, Spring/Summer 1999, pp. 274-288), in which Chinese script is the main language for verbal communication.

<sup>3</sup>3. VIP Reference sends out an electronic newsletter every 10 days to over 250,000 addresses in China, which includes essays and debates on democratic topics. It also sends a daily news bulletin to over 25,000 recipients, containing accounts of dissident initiatives and arrests. The newsletter accepts addresses indiscriminately - many from commercially traded lists - working according to the theory that when there are so many automatic recipients, individuals cannot be accused of deliberately subscribing. *International Herald Tribune*, 17 November 1998, and Centre for Democracy and Technology web page, <http://www.cdt.org/international/chinapress.html>, 25 January 1999.

<sup>4</sup>4. China News Digest is located in Gaithersburg, Maryland. Currently, the main CND web server is receiving approximately 2 million hits per week (with 30% being auxiliary graphics files), and sending out over 25 Gigabytes of information per week. The CND top homepage alone receives about 17,000 visits a day, while the Hua Xia Wen Zhai sub-homepage (in various Chinese coding schemes) is visited, on average, 18,000 times a day. The site includes a virtual library and photo-archive of the Nanjing Massacre, claiming that it involved the murder of 300,000 people and the rape of 20,000 women. <http://www.cnd.org:8023/njmassacre/page1.html>, and following pages.

<sup>5</sup>5. Komisi Nasional Hak Asasi Manusia Indonesia (Indonesian National Commission on Human Rights), *Statement of the National Commission on Human Rights Concerning the Unrest in Jakarta and the Surrounding Areas*, (2 June, 1998), ([www.komnas.go.id/english/cases/cs\\_text02.html](http://www.komnas.go.id/english/cases/cs_text02.html)).

<sup>6</sup>6. Komisi Nasional Hak Asasi Manusia Indonesia (Indonesian National Commission on Human Rights), 'Statement of the National Commission on Human Rights Concerning the Sexual Assault Including Rape of Ethnic Chinese and Other Indonesian Citizens' (8 July, 1998), ([www.komnas.go.id/english/cases/cd\\_text3.html](http://www.komnas.go.id/english/cases/cd_text3.html))

<sup>7</sup>7. The biggest demonstration by overseas Chinese took place on 7 August outside the Indonesian consulate in New York. Organised by 64 overseas Chinese groups, it drew some 3000 people. Similar demonstrations took place simultaneously in other US cities. *Lianhe Bao (LB)*, (*United Daily News* – overseas edition), Taipei, 9 August p. 3.

<sup>8</sup>8. This monitoring was possible by logging into the BBS service at Shanghai's Jiaotong (Communications) University (<http://bbs.sjtu.edu.cn>), which provides access to BBS notices posted from a large range of Chinese universities, including Peking (PKU).

<sup>9</sup>9. See, for example the long article by Rahayu Ratnaningsih from the Jakarta Post (no date supplied), taken from the World Wide Web and posted on the Internet in Chinese by 'mize' at PKU, 11 August 1998.

<sup>10</sup>10. This was put on the website of the Indonesian newspaper, Angkatan Bersenjata, on 19 May 98. See BBC Summary of World Broadcasts (SWB), FE/3232 B/9.



- 
- <sup>11</sup>11. See the letter from a Chinese Indonesian edited and placed on the net by 'rainy' at Qinghua University, and relayed from PKU by 'pythia', 20 August 1998.
- <sup>12</sup>12. *LB*, 29 July 1998, p. 3.
- <sup>13</sup>13. *LB*, 26 July 1998, p. 3.
- <sup>14</sup>14. Demonstrations were also held by women's groups in Singapore, Manila and New York.
- <sup>15</sup>15. *LB*, 3 August 1998, p. 3.
- <sup>16</sup>16. Posted by 'Greenland', PKU, 13 August 1998.
- <sup>17</sup>17. Posted 11 August 1998 by 'hbwang', PKU, in not very good English.
- <sup>18</sup>18. See the notice posted anonymously ('untitled'), PKU, 15 August 1998.
- <sup>19</sup>19. Letter posted by 'bao', PKU, 11 August 1998.
- <sup>20</sup>20. Information posted by 'white horse', PKU, 13 August 1998.
- <sup>21</sup>21. Posted by 'enric', PKU, 10 August 1998.
- <sup>22</sup>22. Posted by 'xiongb (soldier)', PKU, 11 August 1998.
- <sup>23</sup>23. Posted by 'joaquin', PKU, 18 August 1998.
- <sup>24</sup>24. Posted by 'joaquin', PKU, 16 August 1998.
- <sup>25</sup>25. Posted by 'awh (huawen)', PKU, 15 August 1998.
- <sup>26</sup>26. See, for example, the message posted by 'go', PKU, 11 August 1998.
- <sup>27</sup>27. Posted by 'cdt', PKU, 11 August 1998.
- <sup>28</sup>28. From 'dgione' and relayed by 'micheals', PKU, 17 August 1998.
- <sup>29</sup>29. Xinhua news agency bulletin posted on Internet by 'xg' at PKU, 18 August 1998.
- <sup>30</sup>30. Posted by 'vache (C.Bull)', PKU, 17 August 1998.
- <sup>31</sup>31. Posted by 'philip', PKU, 17 August 1998, and relayed by 'whg (white horse)', PKU, 18 August 1998.
- <sup>32</sup>32. Posted by 'look', PKU, 17 August 1998, and relayed by 'whg (white horse)', PKU, 18 August 1998.
- <sup>33</sup>33. Posted by 'xg', PKU, 18 August 1998.
- <sup>34</sup>34. More specifically, the Allied Powers had transferred German concessions in China to Japan, instead of returning them to China as widely hoped for. The resulting patriotic 'May 4 Movement' has been taken by many as the starting point of the Chinese revolution. For some excellent insights into the parallels between the 1989 and the 1919 movement see the essays assembled in Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom and Elizabeth J. Perry (eds.), *Popular Protest and Political Culture in Modern China (Second Edition)*, (Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford: Westview Press, 1994).
- <sup>35</sup>35. See the notice posted by 'vache (C.Bull)', PKU, 17 August 1998.
- <sup>36</sup>36. See, for example, the AP report relayed by 'mize', PKU, 13 August 1998.

- 
- <sup>37</sup>37. Posted by 'mercy', PKU, 17 August 1998, with original comment from 'tandon' included.
- <sup>38</sup>38. Posted by 'Cyclone', PKU, 16 August 1998.
- <sup>39</sup>39. Posted by 'realharlem', PKU, 16 August 1998.
- <sup>40</sup>40. Posted by 'ericlin', PKU, 18 August 1998.
- <sup>41</sup>41. Posted by 'dgione', 16 September 1998, relayed by 'michaels', PKU, 17 September 1998.
- 42
- <sup>43</sup>42. Posted by 'whg (white horse)' and relayed by 'untitled' at PKU with the comment, 'A really good article! Congratulations to the author!', 18 August 1998.
- <sup>44</sup>43. Posted by 'hss', PKU, 26 August 1998.
- <sup>45</sup>44. Posted by 'whg (white horse)', PKU, 1 September 1998.
- <sup>46</sup>45. A lengthy article by Zhang Weiguo posted by 'moveon' at PKU, 1 September 1998.
- <sup>47</sup>46. Original article by Zhang Weiguo relayed by 'whg (white horse)', and posted by 'moveon' at PKU with the comment 'a load of claptrap' on 1 September 1998.
- <sup>48</sup>47. Original article posted by 'bywind' and relayed by 'Salon' then 'RiverHe', PKU, 21 August 1998. See also article posted by 'BBT', PKU, 5 September 1998.
- <sup>49</sup>48. <http://www.huaren.org>
- <sup>50</sup>49. 'Dissident Politics on the Net', *The Economist*, 14 October 1998, p. 8.
- <sup>51</sup>50. For a concise and very recent summary of the problematic relationship between the PRC and Indonesia, see Michael Leifer, 'Indonesia and the Dilemmas of Engagement', in Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert S. Ross, *Engaging China*, (London and New York, Routledge, 1999), pp. 87-108. For a more lengthy and in-depth analysis see Rizel Sukma, *Indonesia and China: The Politics of a Troubled Relationship*, (London and New York, Routledge, 1999)
- <sup>52</sup>51. Leifer, op. cit., p. 92.
- <sup>53</sup>52. The wording of the statement was, 'We have taken note that in some localities in Indonesia there has been unrest. The Chinese side expresses its concern over this. As a friendly neighbour, China hopes that Indonesia will continue maintaining social stability and national harmony so as to aid in its economic recovery and development'. Xinhua News Agency, 14 May 1998, in SWB FE/3228 B/10, 23)
- <sup>54</sup>53. *LB*, 2 August 1998, p. 3.
- <sup>55</sup>54. *LB*, 6 August 1998, p. 3.
- <sup>56</sup>55. Xinhua News Agency, 29 September 1998, in BBC SWB, FE/3344 G/2, cited in Leifer, op. cit., p. 92.
- <sup>57</sup>56. See for example Jerry Berman and Daniel J. Weitzner, 'Technology and Democracy', *Social Research*, Vol. 64. No. 3, Fall 1997, pp. 1313-1319, R. Fenchurch, 'Network Wonderland', *Demos Quarterly*, 1994, No. 4, p.11, A. Adonis and G. Mulgan, 'Back to Greece: The Scope for Direct

---

Democracy', *Demos Quarterly*, 1994, No 3: pp. 2-9.

<sup>58</sup>57. Lee Teng-hui first proposed his two states theory on 9 July 1999 in response to questions submitted by Deutsche Welle (Voice of Germany). The figure of 7,200 attacks was given to a meeting of legislators by Zhang Guangyuan, head of the Information Office of the ROC National Security Bureau. *LB*, 17 August 1999, p. 3.

<sup>59</sup>58. *LB*, 11 August 1999, p. 3, 13 August 1999, p. 3.

<sup>60</sup>59. *Beijing Qingnian Bao (Beijing Youth News)*, 11 May 1995, p. 11.

<sup>61</sup>60. *The Guardian*, 29 January 2000, p. 19.

<sup>62</sup>61. Posted by 'idiot' at PKU, 15 August 1998.

<sup>63</sup>62. *Beijing Qingnian Bao (Beijing Youth News)*, 11 May 1995, p. 11.

<sup>64</sup>63. *Beijing Qingnian Bao (Beijing Youth News)*, 11 May 1995, p. 11.

<sup>65</sup>64. On 25 March 1998 a thirty-year-old software engineer, Mr Lin Hai, was arrested in Shanghai and charged with inciting the subversion of state power, because he was alleged to have supplied 30,000 email addresses in the PRC to 'VIP News'. *International Herald Tribune*, 17 November 1998, and Centre for Democracy and Technology web page, <http://www.cdt.org/international/chinapress.html>, 25 January 1999.

<sup>66</sup>65. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London/NY, Verso, 1983/1991.