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The “Little Pink” versus “Glass Hearts”: The Growth of Cyber-nationalism in China and the Risk of Misunderstanding

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Students at Tianjin University. Who are the “little pink”?
Photo by Akson on Unsplash.

SYNOPSIS

The growth of cyber-nationalism in China, as exemplified by the emergence and activism of the “little pink”, is a reflection of the changes in the worldview of the younger generation, propelled by China’s phenomenal growth and its acrimonious relations with the West. Understanding the pluralistic context in China and sociopolitical constraints that the “little pink” is subject to could help lead us to see a fuller picture of Chinese nationalism.

COMMENTARY

In the past few weeks, a music video titled *Hear the sound of a broken glass heart* (*Tingjian bolixin sui de shengyin*) has been going viral on YouTube. The clumsy, pink-clad panda featured in the video apparently symbolises the “little pink” (*xiao fenhong*) — a group of young Chinese netizens who tend to openly assert their nationalism, who boast about China’s achievements and are extremely sensitive to any domestic or foreign criticism of China, while “glass hearts” refers to their prickly nationalism that is easily aroused at the slightest provocation. The song is thus a direct assault on China’s “little pink” cyber-nationalists.

The five-minute song was composed by a Malaysian hip-hop artist, Wee Meng Chee (Namewee), and an Australian singer, Kimberley Chen. It was uploaded to YouTube on 15 October and has received over 27 million views so far. Contrary to the raging popularity of the video clip in some parts of the world, it is blocked in China. Chen’s newly launched Weibo account also has been blocked.

The lyrics of the song are full of buzzwords that touch on a wide range of sensitive and controversial issues for China, including the Taiwan and Hong Kong issues, Xinjiang cotton, the origins of the coronavirus, poverty eradication, some aspects of daily life in China, and even the experiences of the Chinese political elite. The tone reflects a mixture of sarcasm, a sense of pity, and perhaps also some extent of bewilderment in response to the issues highlighted.

Putting aside some of the controversies that this music video has generated, we need to understand that the emergence of the “little pink” has its roots in the socio-economic situation in China and the international political environment. It also reflects the changing Chinese mentality towards the outside world. But a more nuanced understanding of the “little pink” phenomenon is necessary and useful.

The Origins

The “little pink” cyber-nationalism, the target of the music video, did not emerge until the 2010s and has become increasingly conspicuous since the so-called “Diba expedition” of 2016, when thousands of cyber-nationalists trolled Taiwan’s newly elected leader. The “little pink” phenomenon signifies a significant shift in the worldview of many Chinese people towards China itself and the outside world, especially the Western world. From an inferiority complex represented by the documentary *River Elegy* in the 1980s to a sense of superiority epitomised by the “bravo, my country” narrative of the past decade, the Chinese mentality towards the West has swayed like a pendulum from one side to the other.

When China’s reform and opening up started in the late 1970s, the prevalent attitude towards the West in Chinese society was admiration. After decades of political turmoil and isolation during the Mao era, young Chinese of that generation had finally gotten in touch with the outside world. They soon realised that China was poor and backward and were eager to seize every opportunity to improve their living standards. Benefiting from foreign investments and technology transfers, China’s industrial and scientific capacity improved significantly, and the Chinese people became wealthier. In the early

years of the reform era, many Chinese viewed the West as a model of modernisation. Their attitude was captured in a popular saying at that time: “the moon looks brighter abroad”.

As the reforms took effect and brought economic advancement, the self-confidence of the Chinese grew steadily on the one hand; on the other hand, the relationship between China and the world gradually changed with China’s rise. As a result, the Chinese mentality towards the West also began to shift.

The changes of perception are most notable among the “little pink”, who were born in the 1990s and grew up in affluence. Unlike their parents and grandparents, they generally have almost no memory of China’s political chaos and economic austerity, being used only to rapid socio-economic progress, which explains why they have many positive things to say about China’s political system and its policies and display strong confidence in China’s future.

Moreover, their worldview may have been significantly influenced by the education system and the media, both of which emphasise China’s past suffering from imperialism and invasions. The current tensions between China and some Western countries may have reinforced their sense of suffering. Therefore, the “bravo, my country” discourse reflects the genuine pride these young Chinese feel and serves as a response to the setbacks in China’s foreign relations. It may also demonstrate their reluctance to rationally view and treat people who hold different values.

Many observers assume that these “little pink” nationalistic youths represent mainstream Chinese public opinion. Although it is generally believed that many Chinese people are becoming more and more confident, it may be an exaggeration to say that the vast majority of Chinese favour such blind patriotism and irrational views. In fact, since its emergence, the “little pink” phenomenon has been a matter of some controversy domestically.

A Vocal Minority

Firstly, the prevalence of the online voices of the “little pink” over the years does not necessarily mean that this group represents an overwhelming proportion of young Chinese. Rather, the fact that the “little pink” cyber-nationalists tend to be more vocal in the virtual world and highly adept at using social media tools has amplified their voices. Many among the Chinese intellectual elite harbour critical views towards the “little pink”, but under the current sociopolitical environment they are either compelled to keep silent or do not have channels to get their voices heard.

Secondly, the authorities have kept in close check the bottom-up popular nationalism that is represented by the “little pink”. Although the Communist Party of China has resorted to promoting patriotism to shore up its legitimacy and public support, it prefers top-down mobilisation. Any form of collective action that emerges from society in line with officially sanctioned narratives may gain some acquiescence from the state apparatus, but would not win direct support from the leadership. Moreover, the political elites constantly monitor and from time to time even admonish the low-level naïve or ridiculous flattery (*di ji hong*) that can be detected in some online posts or video materials circulated by the “little pink” activists.

Thirdly, many members of the “little pink” appear to possess dual identities — they are over-confident about the country, on one hand, and pessimistic about their own prospects, on the other hand. Compared with the older generations who have reaped the benefits of reform, the “little pink” face fierce competition and difficulty in climbing the social ladder. The resulting disenchantment is manifested in the “lying flat” phenomenon. Therefore, uttering extremely patriotic expressions becomes a way of venting their frustrations over their stalled career aspirations and their resentment of their well-off fellow citizens who show any pro-West inclinations.

The “little pink” phenomenon has not arisen out of thin air; rather, its evolution and influence have their roots in China’s socio-economic conditions and the international political environment. Keeping in mind these dynamics would be helpful in understanding the views and actions of the “little pink” cyber-nationalists, and in avoiding a simplistic view of public opinion in China.

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