



The Spartacus in China's Wonderland by Yu Jing Shen Tu

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China's leadership offered a Christmas gift to *Wangmins* (Chinese netizens): a possible new law about real-name registration on the Internet, which triggered fierce objections by the advocates for free expression online. This is the subtext of Vice Premier Wang Qishan's recommendation to officials to read Tocqueville's "The Old Regime and the French Revolution," which warns about the social disorders that revolutions can create. The push for real-name Internet registration not only shows the government's intent to tighten its control over the Internet, it also reflects Beijing's fear that *Wangmins* could lead a revolution in China. Ironically, the real source of concern is demand for political reform from Maoists on the left, rather than democrats on the right.

During China's pivotal 18th National Party Congress, the Internet featured numerous mentions and images of the Hollywood movie Sparta. It took a while for web censors to realize that *Wangmins* were using "Si Ba Da," the Chinese translation of "Sparta," for "Shi Ba Da," an acronym for the 18th Congress because of the similarity in pronunciation. This joke became code for Chinese "Spartacus" – the angry *Wangmins* who fought internet censorship by the Chinese government. According to data provided by the China Internet Network Information Center, almost one of every three Chinese is a *Wangmin*; there are 538 million internet users in total, more than 40 percent of the Chinese population. The code and jokes have helped build a digital culture and unique identity for this Internet-using population. Their opinions have been amplified by social networks and they have acquired more influence in China's decision-making process. As a result, Chinese *Wangmins* are an engaged cohort that has embraced freedom of speech on the Internet, in sharp contrast to the restricted political discourse in China's mainstream media.

Many observers hope this activism is a sign of growing democracy in China. In fact, it could have the opposite effect. Chinese nationalists are trying to increase their influence by spreading a "victim narrative" to manipulate public ideas and pressure the government to take an assertive position in territorial disputes. This dangerous trend is obvious in recent anti-Japan demonstrations. In September, netizens used QQs, Renrens, and Weibos (China's most popular social networks) to mobilize tens of thousands of people to take to the streets during waves of anti-Japan protests in more than 80 major cities. Most protests were led by neo-Maoists and leftists who gained support from the masses as a result of fragile social values and growing factions in China.

Increasing numbers of *Wangmins* are active on extremist websites. Some nationalist *Wangmins* claim Maoist revivals are "Red Waves" against Westerners who seek to bring the "Arab Spring" to China. While the "Red Song Campaign" launched by former Chongqing Communist Party Secretary Bo Xilai disappeared after his dismissal, a recent online appeal to defend Bo's model on the "Red China" website has been signed by 1,400 *Wangmins*, evidence of the disruptive role that these nationalists play on the Internet and their aim to lead a Maoist revival.

In recent years, especially since the intensification of the Diaoyu Islands dispute, there has been more discussion of the "Glorious Era" of Mao Zedong stirred by extremist and neo-Maoist *Wangmins*. They try to rewrite history by asserting that if Mao was still alive, the Japanese would not dare to be so assertive. The neo-Maoists argue that Japan sought to restore diplomatic relations with China because of Mao's resolute action in the Korean War; he successfully defended China's status and reputation and the Japanese admired China for it. Protesters with Chairman Mao's portraits stood out in large-scale anti-Japanese protests this year. Deng's portraits or the slogan "Xiaoping ni hao," the most popular sign since the open-door economic reforms, are rarely spotted nowadays. Hard-line nationalists on QQs and Weibos demand "Let's fight! We don't have to be so rational in dealing with Japan. We should learn from the US. Beat them up until they surrender. We are now a strong country, we don't need to sit back. If we can't solve the problem through negotiation, start the war. Sometimes war is the best way to maintain peace." Angry protesters were mobilized to attack restaurants and cars with Japanese logos, even hurting innocent people.

Many Chinese *Wangmins* were tolerant of the political violence employed by neo-Maoists. Many of them expressed support on blogs. One well-known radical nationalist, Professor Han Deqiang, accused an 80-year-old anti-Maoist protester of being a traitor and slapped him twice, even though the old man was an anti-Japanese protester. Supporters of Han believe that such attacks are a patriotic duty. Blogger Zhang Hongliang called on readers to "Support Han Deqiang's righteous action in cracking down on the traitor without hesitation. Every country has the right to defend its religion. The American film that insulted Islamic belief resulted in waves of anti-US protests. Why can't we have the freedom to believe in Chairman Mao? How can we allow the law to give liberty to those people who insult Chairman Mao?"

The neo-Maoists and left-wing extremists insist that their bullying and violence are justified by patriotism. The Neo-Maoist call on others to prove their dedication to the motherland prompted passionate *Wangmins* to embrace Maoism, especially the younger generation who have no knowledge of the horrors of the Cultural Revolution.

This nationalistic hysteria and its accompanying violence could be the leading edge of a new Boxer Rebellion or the next generation of Red Guards. A hardcore nationalist vented his militant sentiment on a blog, noting that “Either we fight or we have to use massive weapons, like nuclear ones. If we don’t use such weapons, we won’t be able to beat the united armies of Japan and US and can’t stop the robbers who take advantage of our unstable situation. We have to sacrifice in order to protect our national interest.”

The neo-Maoists encourage *Wangmins* to consider themselves a heroic Spartacus, fighting and sacrificing for the country. In fact, these *Wangmins* resemble Alice as she wanders through Wonderland. In truth, a hardline nationalist Beijing government is unlikely because the leadership’s priority is boosting economic growth. Just as Nixon’s anti-communism allowed his administration to resume relations with China, a similar logic could guide Xi Jinping. Xi’s rhetoric may sound “nationalist,” but his promotion of policies and recent actions against corruption will give him space to pursue a more cooperative diplomatic policy in territorial disputes.

The worst scenario could occur if the marginalized “Spartacus” acting as if they are genuine “patriotic thugs,” mobilized *Wangmins* to cheer for war. *Wangmins* loathe political interest groups but lack the opportunity to make change. That partly explains the positive reception they give to the neo-Maoist call to extinguish certain classes and why it is accepted as a remedy for Chinese society. As one blogger argued “I won’t say yes (to the war), but second generations of rich people and officials should stand in the front line (if war is unavoidable), followed by the corrupt officials, civil servants, etc. Common people should stay behind and those unemployed, displaced, retired, rural migrant workers should be the last. If the richest lost their lives during the war, their wealth should be distributed to the poor. Then the war can solve most of the internal conflicts within China.”

Concerned by this populist tendency, *Wangmins* have been tagged by the Beijing government as “radicals” in pursuit of freedom, justice, and democracy. But it still is not clear if the government seeks to reduce verbal violence or to silence those protesting social injustice and corruption. The government’s determination to apply real-name Internet registration may protect the status quo, but whether it becomes a sword hanging over the head of China’s Spartacus or just further empowers them is also uncertain.

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