"Melon-Eating Masses": Consumer-Citizens and Public Internet Discourse in China

Jamie Wong
Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)

Vesper Long
Wellesley College

Yilia Qu
Wellesley College

Graham Jones
Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)

Extended abstract

In China, a nation with tight controls on freedom of speech, public gossiping online about scandals and celebrity news is a key mode of public engagement and site for the co-production of national imaginaries. We draw attention to the Chinese internet genre of the "melon-eating" event and the notion of "melon-eating masses" to understand how the state, neoliberal capitalism, and digital mass media converge towards cultivating a particular form of "consumer-citizen" (Mazzarella 2013). We illustrate how, in China, what may at first sight seem like entertainment, gossip or other forms of playful online engagement are a significant modality of public discourse. Anthropologists have long known that gossip is a means of producing social cohesion by policing moral transgression (Besnier 2009). By examining how Chinese internet users participate in public gossip when the state looms as the final arbiter of judgement, this study illuminates how the politics of "knowing what not to know" (Hillenbrand 2020) unfold in day-to-day (digital) lives in China.

The notion of "melon-eating" (*chigua*) harkens back to an era when spectators ate roasted seeds (*guazi*) as snacks at theaters. The recent abbreviation of *guazi* to *gua* (melon) means that the related memes and emojis feature a watermelon rather than seeds. Today, melon-eating refers to the passive spectatorship of online bystanders, who

consume real-life events just as they would consume theatrical drama while snacking on concessions.

The term is morally laden. It evokes the 20th century writer Lu Xun's critique of the "gawker mentality" of Chinese masses who spectate without involvement, which he regarded as a key cause of China's victimization. A more hopeful association comes from the techno-solutionist slogan "attention is power, onlookers can change China," introduced in 2010 to popularize the micro-blogging platform Weibo. Many were inspired by instances when e-public pressure through Weibo prompted official responses to events that offended public morals (China Digital Times 2010; Tang 2017), and harbored hopes of a new era of "accountability without democracy" (Tsai 2007). Yet as problematic biases revealed themselves in the way algorithms and the data economy shape internet users' exposure to news (Dong 2017), jaded internet commentators would proclaim "changing China through onlooking" had given way to "melon-eating being mobilized to drive key performance indexes (of tech giants)" (Jie 2020).

We draw on the meta-discourse around three "melon-eating" events: (1) the controversy around the news that actress Zheng Shuang abandoning the children she had through surrogacy; (2) the discovery of a mother of eight found chained in a village hut in Xuzhou; and (3) news of the Taiwanese-American popstar Wang Leehom's messy divorce from his wife Lee Jinglei. We demonstrate how, in the crowded, fiercely competitive "attention economy" (Davenport and Beck 2001) of the Chinese internet, attention is collectively construed as a "public" and civic "resource." We show the collective "genre work" (Gershon and Prentice 2021) that is required to make a "melon" out of an event, and a national event out of a "melon." We demonstrate how internet debates on public morals and societal ills that the political framework of the Chinese public sphere can't otherwise accommodate take place through publicly gossiping, arguing, voting, and polling about these scandals. These debates, ostensibly about celebrity scandals, also intimate "public secrets" – "something that is known by everyone, but not easily articulable" (Taussig 1999, 160) – and therefore involves the "risk of open acknowledgment, which threatens the ritual order and ontological security of everyday life" (Jones 2014, 55). Mass participation in melon-eating involves "public affect management vis-a-vis modern mass media" (Mazzarella 2013, 11), but rather than focusing solely on state censorship, we also highlight instances of internet users themselves quelling the "affective intensities" of mass publics (Mazzarella 2021) to preempt the spread of socially corrosive forces.

Our examples show that the discussion of public morals creates "fractal recursivities" that dichotomize and partition (Irvine and Gal 2000) Chinese internet users into a measured and reasonable "public" that constructs itself in opposition to the unfettered "masses." Through attending to the "social poetics" (Herzfeld 1988) of netizens' performance of "rationality" and their understanding and stereotyping of each other, we show how domestic social imaginaries of the Chinese nation and the "rational" Chinese consumer-citizen are co-produced (Jasanoff 2004; Erickson et al 2013), and how they serve to deflect criticism from the Chinese state.

We build on anthropological scholarship on gossip as a form of social control (Merry 1984) to explore how public gossiping becomes incorporated into the state's panoptic apparatus of collective self-policing. As Chinese internet users form "partial theories" about "relationships and events" (Van Vleet 2003) through public gossip, "melon-eating" can

paradoxically normalize the unknowability of truth under an already-opaque governmental regime.

References

Besnier, Niko. 2009. *Gossip and the Everyday Production of Politics*. University of Hawai'i Press.

China Digital Times. 2010. "关注就是力量 围观改变中国 Attention is Power, Onlooking Can Change China." 中国数字时代. October 2, 2010. https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/110427.html.

Davenport, Thomas H., and John C. Beck. 2001. *The Attention Economy: Understanding the New Currency of Business*. Cambridge MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Dong, Chengyu. 2017. "围观改变中国，算法改变围观 - FT中文网." Financial Times. 2017. http://www.ftchinese.com/story/001075587?full=y&archive.

Erickson, Paul, Judy L. Klein, Lorraine Daston, Rebecca Lemov, Thomas Sturm, and Michael D. Gordin. 2013. *How Reason Almost Lost Its Mind: The Strange Career of Cold War Rationality*. University of Chicago Press.

Gershon, Ilana, and Michael M. Prentice. 2021. "Genres in New Economies of Language." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 2021 (267–268): 117–24.

Herzfeld, Michael. 1988. *The Poetics of Manhood: Contest and Identity in a Cretan Mountain Village*. Princeton University Press.

———. 1997. *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics and the Real Life of States, Societies, and Institutions*. Routledge.

Hillenbrand, Margaret. 2020. *Negative Exposures: Knowing What Not to Know in Contemporary China*. Duke University Press.

Irvine, Judith T, and Susan Gal. 2000. "Language Ideology and Linguistic Differentiation." In *Regimes of Language: Ideologies, Politics, and Identities*, edited by Paul Kroskrity, 35–84. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.

Jasanoff, Sheila. 2004. *States of Knowledge*. Taylor & Francis Abingdon, UK.

Jie Cheng. 2020. "告别2010年代，'流量商业'的过去与未来？." 虎嗅 Huxiu. March 25, 2020. https://www.huxiu.com/article/346521.html.

Jones, Graham M. 2014. "Secrecy." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43: 53–69.

Mazzarella, William. 2013. *Censorium: Cinema and the Open Edge of Mass Publicity*. Duke University Press.

———. 2021. *The Mana of Mass Society*. University of Chicago Press.

Merry, Sally Engle. 1984. "Rethinking Gossip and Scandal." In *Toward a General Theory of Social Control*, 271–302. Elsevier.

Tang, Xiaobing. 2017. "围观改变中国？——互联网书写与中国式公共领域的特质 Have Onlookers Changed China? Characteristics of Internet Writing and The Chinese-Style Public Sphere." In *Harvard-Yenching Institute Working Paper Series*. https://www.harvard-yenching.org/research/hyi-working-paper-series-tang-xiaobing/.

Taussig, Michael. 1999. *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*. Stanford University Press.

Tsai, Lily L. 2007. *Accountability without Democracy: Solidary Groups and Public Goods Provision in Rural China*. Cambridge University Press.