

Exploring the Neglected Constraints on *Chindia*: Analysing the Online Chinese Perception of India and its Interaction with China's Indian Policy*

Simon Shen[†]

ABSTRACT In recent years, the governments of China and India have initiated a strategic partnership. Talks of creating an integrated “*Chindia*” economic hub have been commonplace. Many studies have been undertaken from conflicting perspectives on bilateral relations at the high level, but how ordinary Chinese people view their contemporary Indian counterparts and how this provides a civic dimension to the partnership remains under-explored. In an authoritarian nation where exhibiting sentiments contrary to the party-state’s policy is not encouraged and remains uncommon, the Chinese have increasingly relied upon the internet to express their views on various aspects of policy, including that towards India. Using systematic, qualitative research on the online community, this article categorizes the various opinions expressed by Chinese internet users about India, the Indians and Beijing’s Indian policy; analyses the apparent huge gap between these perceptions and the official rhetoric of Beijing; and forecasts how such perceptions might influence future Sino-Indian relations.

In recent years, the governments of China and India have initiated a strategic partnership. Talks of creating an integrated “*Chindia*” economic hub have been commonplace. Many studies have been undertaken from conflicting perspectives on bilateral relations at the high level, but how ordinary Chinese people view their contemporary Indian counterparts and how this provides a civic dimension to the partnership remains under-explored. In an authoritarian nation where exhibiting sentiments contrary to the party-state’s policy is not encouraged and remains uncommon, the Chinese have increasingly relied upon the internet to express their views on various aspects of policy, including that towards India. Using systematic, qualitative research on the online community, this article

* The author thanks Michael Ka-ho Yu for his support in primary data organization and collection for this article.

† Hong Kong Institute of Education. Email: simons@ied.edu.hk

tackles the following questions. What general opinions do Chinese internet users voice about India, the Indians and Beijing's Indian policy? How are the anti-Indian messages being sequenced? How can the apparent gap between these perceptions and the official rhetoric of Beijing be explained? How might such perceptions influence Sino-Indian relations?

In order to explore these questions the article is divided into four sections. The first offers theoretical propositions for the online perceptions; a description of the methodology and sources follow. The core section analyses the primary sources corresponding to the propositions. Answers to the questions and their implications for future Sino-Indian relations are discussed in the conclusion.

Research Propositions

Before attempting to study online messages, it is essential to note the academic studies on the stereotypes which exist in the minds of real-life Chinese of Indians and the prejudice presented in contemporary Chinese writings on India. In order to prove whether these known perceptions of India extend into the online domain, this research proposes six propositions based on existing studies.

The Indians are seen as racially inferior to the Chinese

Dark skin is always a key identifier of Indians in the conventional Chinese perception, especially in that of the ethnic Han 汉 who comprise more than 90 per cent of the total population of China. As studied by leading cultural sinologist Frank Dikötter, there is a general mental link between physical appearance and cultural level or class status in Han Chinese society. As part of this mind process, the black race, which the Han ethnic group sees as being set apart from itself, is often referred to as being of the colour of devils or slaves and rarely associated with culture, status or prestige.¹ Despite its political incorrectness and frank racism, this mental link leads to the proposition that many Chinese people (the ethnic Han in particular) perceive Indians as being racially inferior to themselves. In this regard, the commonality of Africans and Indians in the Chinese perception is based more on biological skin colour than economic insufficiency: the impoverished Albanians or Gypsies, for instance, are rarely discriminated against by the Chinese in the same way as the Indians and Africans are.

India is seen as economically backward to China

While China has enjoyed rapid economic growth since the 1990s, Chinese academics are aware that India, as a member of the "BRIC" bloc, is also undergoing economic and technological upgrading. However, the economic structure of India is often criticized by Chinese scholars for its lack of infrastructure and its

1 Frank Dikötter, *Discourse of Race in Modern China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

lingering caste system.² While India keeps calling for further investment from China, over 60 per cent of Chinese enterprises, according to a journal for Chinese entrepreneurs, do not take India seriously and do not believe that it can surpass China economically.³ It is hypothesized that mainstream Chinese netizens pay little attention to the strength of the Indian economy, and present an overwhelming confidence in the superiority of the Chinese economic system over that of India.

India is seen as militarily inferior to China

In recent years, the military capabilities of India, especially those of its navy, have been greatly upgraded, and its nuclear capacity has long held the world's attention. While mainstream Chinese scholars do not have high hopes for India's economy, many of them think highly of its military potential by focusing on its regional nuclear deterrence strategy and a sea power capable of challenging China.⁴ This attention among academia is partly to alert fellow Chinese to the potential that India might one day take revenge for its military defeat by China in the 1962 border war, and partly to exert a sense of urgency among the nationalists.⁵ It is hypothesized that as many of the Chinese netizens are nationalist oriented they would echo the above view.

India is seen as a Western ally helping encircle China

To realist observers, Sino-Indian relations are always dominated by a macro balance of power. While China remains the most important ally of Pakistan and their alliance is viewed by the Indians as an attempt to encircle their nation, India reacts with a counter-encirclement campaign against China. This view is strongly held by Chinese academia particularly when US-Indian friendship is taken into consideration.⁶ It is then reasonable to hypothesize that outrage against such Indian encirclement and radical messages calling for hard measures will emerge in the online Chinese community.

India is seen as subverting Chinese sovereignty

Unification, sovereignty and irredentism are topics which constantly attract Chinese attention. The most fragile Chinese border area is that with India, partly

2 Liu Xiaoxue, "Can India surmount China?" *Shijie zhishi (World Affairs)*, No. 5 (2004), pp. 46–48.

3 Hu Yuan, "Is India going to take over China?" *Zhongguo qiyejia (China Entrepreneur)*, No. 6 (2004), pp. 34–36.

4 Wang Yaodong, "India is ferocious," *Dongbei zhi chuang (Window of North East)*, No. 6 (2009), pp. 62–63.

5 Zhan Dexiong, "Treat the Indian complex attitude rationally," *Shishi baogao (Report on Current Affairs)*, No. 7 (2009), pp. 49–52.

6 Wei Ling, "Analysing the American-Indian relationship and its implication for China," *Jiaoxue yu yanjiu (Teaching and Research)*, No. 5 (2007), pp. 67–72.

because of the Sino-Indian border war and partly because of the hosting of the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala. Chinese academic members are overwhelmingly alert to any role India may have in supporting separatism in China.⁷ It is suggested that there may be strong links between India and the Tibetan dissidents, and even other separatist groups in China, in the online Chinese community, together with a call for India to disconnect its ties with the separatists as a prerequisite for further integration between the two economies.

Sino-Indian strategic partnership receives half-hearted support

In November 2006, China and India signed a joint declaration of mutual friendship, which was intended to serve as the groundwork for a future Sino-Indian strategic partnership. To some Chinese scholars, the declaration would solve the existing bilateral problems by identifying the West as their common opponent.⁸ However, the above propositions suggest that the Chinese netizens may express scepticism and cynicism for the declaration, while any potential rapprochement between the two countries is expected to receive at most half-hearted support.

Sources Selection and Methodology

In order to test these propositions and to study any discrepancies between the online perception and the official Indian policy, eight discussion forums were selected as the sample groups from which to gather primary sources. This section explains the time frame for the source collection, how the forums were selected, the rough statistical ratio of the messages' rational/radical level, and how the messages were codified and categorized.

Time frame

The three years between November 2006 and December 2009 were chosen as the time frame. The joint declaration was signed on 22 November 2006, marking a new era of official mutual Sino-Indian engagement, and the research was continued to 31 December 2009, before which a series of border conflicts took place, therefore allowing both optimism and pessimism about bilateral relations to be observed during this period.

Selection of online discussion forums

The online discussion forums selected had to fulfil two requirements. The first was popularity as judged by hit rates and visits per month; the second was

7 Chen Kinxia and Li Daguo, "Chinese countermeasures for solving the Tibet matter," *Yinshan xuekan* (*Yinshan Academic Journal*), Vol. 19, No. 3 (2006), pp. 93–97.

8 Zhong Songwen, "Co-operation and balance: Chinese strategic choice towards India," *Chongqing Keji xueyuan xuebao* (*Journal of Chongqing University of Science and Technology*), No. 3 (2009), pp. 48–49.

their focus on international relations as judged by the designated topics of discussion. The research set out to ensure a mixed representation of forums with inclinations towards different viewpoints, particularly liberal views and their opposition, which are the dominating dichotomized schools of interpretation in China. Forums targeting both veteran international observers and more casual viewers were also covered. The background and identities of the selected forums are summarized as follows.

Strong Nation Forum (SNF) (Qiangguo luntan 强国论坛), set up in 1999 in response to the Belgrade Embassy Bombing, is arguably the earliest and most famous meeting point of online Chinese nationalists. It is run by the state-owned *People's Daily (Renmin ribao 人民日报)* and can gather over 1,300,000 visitors at any one time.⁹

Community of Iron and Blood (CIB) (Tiexie luntan 铁血论坛) is a forum run by amateurish military fans which focuses extensively on military affairs. It is also famous for nationalist expressions.¹⁰

Peace Forum (PF) (Zhongguo heping luntan 中国和平论坛), run by the official China Internet Information Centre, has over 220,000 members. Although nationalism and patriotism are the forum's obvious inclinations, comments are more rational than those found in *SNF* or *CIB*.¹¹

Resuscitation Forum (RF) (Fuxing luntan 复兴论坛) is run by the official *China Central Television*. It also inclines towards nationalism and patriotism, aiming at promoting the resuscitation of China.¹²

Tianya Community (TYC) (Tianya xiequ 天涯论坛) was established at roughly the same time as the *SNF*, of which it is seen as a keen competitor. It is privately run from Hainan Island. Originally famous for featuring liberal ideas, new leftist and nationalist sentiments have been notably present in *TYC* in recent years.¹³

Phoenix Net Forum (PNF) (Fenghuangwang luntan 凤凰网论坛), run by the privately owned Phoenix Satellite Television Company Limited (*Fenghuang weixing dianshi 凤凰卫视电视*), is also a popular online base of Chinese liberals. A single topic can have over 12,000 hits over a night.¹⁴

FOB Business Forum (FBF) (Fubu waimao luntan 福步外贸论坛) is a business-oriented forum with over 820,000 members and an average of over 7,500 new posts per day. It is a popular platform for Chinese businessmen doing business overseas, including those who have to interact with the Indians.¹⁵

Backchina Network (BCN) (Beikeqin shequ 倍可亲社区), a forum run by overseas Chinese living in the US, has over 220,000 members.¹⁶ Despite its host's

9 <http://bbs1.people.com.cn/boardList.do?action=postList&boardId=1>, accessed 28 September 2009.

10 <http://bbs.tiexue.net>, accessed 28 September 2009.

11 <http://www.china.com.cn/bbs/>, accessed 28 September 2009.

12 <http://fuxing.bbs.cctv.com/>, accessed 28 September 2009.

13 www.tianya.cn, accessed 28 September 2009.

14 <http://bbs.ifeng.com/>, accessed 28 September 2009.

15 <http://bbs.fobshanghai.com/>, accessed 28 September 2009.

16 <http://club.backchina.com/>, accessed 28 September 2009.

geographical position, most of its users and readers are from mainland China rather than Hong Kong or Taiwan. It is included to enhance the representation of the samples.

Proportion of rational and radical messages

In order to tackle the issue of how rational or radical the above forums are, an empirical study was conducted as follows. One year in the time frame was selected to examine all the India-related posts (1 November 2008–31 October 2009). By adopting and modifying the framework of Arvaja and his colleagues when they studied group-level perspectives, three categories of postings are classified from the samples: personal (mainly expressing personal emotions without much sophistication); judgmental (including detailed analyses to express opinionated agreement or disagreement); and informative (primarily presenting information in a relatively opinion-free and academic manner).¹⁷ In general, if posts in a forum incline towards the “personal” category, that forum is more radical; and if they incline towards the “informative” type, the forum is more rational. The number of all India-related posts in this particular year can be retrieved by keyword search. Among them, we take a confidence level of 95 per cent to select roughly 400 to 600 postings from each forum to study, and these sampled postings are classified into one of the three categories to obtain a ratio of the three for each forum’s related messages (see Table 1).

Table 1 shows that forums like *SNF*, *CIB*, *PF* and *RF* have relatively high numbers of personal-oriented posts; opinions in *PNF* and *TYC* tend to be relatively rational with their personal stances maintained; and opinions from forums targeting professionals like *FOB* and *BCN* are informative-oriented. Although the ratio does not represent a holistic view of these forums, it can still be used to study their comparative rational levels. Most surprisingly, it is generally found that the forums normally visited by liberals, despite their relative rationality, do not show a great deviation of stance towards India from the radical nationalists, making the online Chinese perception of India more monolithic than that of the US or Japan. Using a rough calculation, messages expressing a positive feeling towards India accounted for at most one-tenth. This same ratio is fairly standardized across all forums visited, making hard-line comments on India representative of an overwhelming majority of the Chinese netizens.

Codification of messages

Among the forums selected, all postings on India during our time frame – sorted by keyword search in the content containing India, “*asan* 阿三” or

17 M. Arvaja *et al.*, “Combing individual and group-level perspectives to study collaborative knowledge construction in context,” *Learning and Instruction*, No. 17 (2007), pp. 448–59.

Table 1: Empirical Ratio of Rational/Radical Level of the Selected Forums

Forum	India-related posts in one year*	Sample size†	A	B	C	Ratio of A:B:C (%)‡
<i>Strong Nation Forum</i>	9,562	565	274	160	131	48.5:28.3:23.2
<i>Com. Iron and Blood</i>	17,960	581	317	180	84	54.6:31:14.5
<i>Peace Forum</i>	2,741	493	200	205	88	40.6:41.6:17.8
<i>Resuscitation Forum</i>	8,798	562	257	204	101	45.7:36.3:18
<i>Tianya Community</i>	96,221	597	211	299	87	35.3:50:14.6
<i>Phoenix Net Forum</i>	10,437	568	146	325	97	25.7:57.2:17
<i>FOB Business Forum</i>	9,156	563	150	176	237	26.6:31.3:42.1
<i>Backchina Network</i>	1,240	405	92	154	159	22.7:38:39.3

Notes:

*This number includes the responses to original posts. Sometimes there can be hundreds of responses to a single post; sometimes there is none. The number is counted manually after using keyword search as restricted by the time frame.

† Confidence level: 95%; confidence interval: 4.

‡ A: personal; B: judgmental; C: informative.

“*acha* 阿差” – were comprehensively studied.¹⁸ Representative quotations were coded into different categories in response to the six propositions. Discourse analysis was applied to analyse the postings. Efforts were made to ensure an equal representation of forums dominated by the three types of messages as classified in Table 1; however, differences among the forums on India, as explained, are not as sharp as expected. We also acknowledge the difficulty of differentiating the comments posted by ordinary users and those posted by users allegedly paid by the party-state (*wumaodang* 五毛党).

Analysing Online Chinese Perceptions of Contemporary India and Indians

There is no single view of India expressed by Chinese netizens. However, the nine-tenths majority view of the online Chinese community, no matter whether in forums that are nationalist or liberal in inclination, can be summarized into two arenas: a view of India as the “yellow sick man” and its depiction as a trouble-maker for Beijing. These perceptions and, where they are obvious, the differences between the online new leftists and liberals, are analysed into six categories which correspond to our propositions.

General racist stereotypes: curry, dirtiness and Darwinism

In response to the first proposition, in all forums, racist sentiments towards the Indians are overwhelming. As Dikötter proposes, at least half of the Chinese netizens perceive the dark-skinned Indians as belonging to a lower class, and a handful of them are even of the (mis)understanding that Indians and Africans are of

¹⁸ “*Asan*” is a slang term which originated in Shanghai and was spread widely by the internet; “*acha*” originates from Guangdong and was used mainly by Cantonese-speaking Chinese in the south.

the same race because of their skin colour.¹⁹ In their minds, India is stereotyped by terms such as “curry,” “dirty” and “poor,” and these images are almost always interconnected.²⁰ For instance, Indian curry is often blamed for creating a particularly strange body-odour, which further conceptualizes the netizens’ image of the dirt and poverty of India.²¹ It is common for those who highlight curry to use this cultural symbol to jeer at India, describing it as the “nation of curry” or Indians as “people whose brains are filled with curry,” implying a certain Darwinist evolutionary worldview that curry belongs to a less civilized population.²² Such racism comes not only from relatively radical forums like *SNF* but also from liberal forums like *TYC* and informative-oriented forums like *FBF*.

Partly linked to curry, the stereotyping of India as “the dirty nation” almost reaches a consensus in the online Chinese community; the country is also sometimes called “the rubbish nation” that is “dirty, messy and bad.”²³ This stereotype is in complete contrast to the historic image of India recorded by the famous Buddhist scholar Xuan Zhuang 玄奘 in the sixth century who credited India with comparative cleanliness compared with the China of his time.²⁴

Digging deeper into this stereotype, about half of the Chinese netizens who hold such views not only see things physically but also culturally, for example viewing the practice of eating with the hands from an evolutionary point of view: “I have an Indian client. When we had a meal together after a meeting, he threw aside his pair of chopsticks and ate directly with his hand. He put the rice, together with the sauce, with his hand into his mouth. It’s extremely disgusting!”²⁵ Assuming that Indians use their left hands for the process of cleaning themselves after defecating, the Chinese netizens overwhelmingly and repeatedly use “unbelievable,” “surprised,” “losing appetite while looking at their hands” and the like to describe this facet of Indian culture, even though the practice is largely limited to non-urban areas in India nowadays and is also shared by some rural areas in China.²⁶ When a few netizens from the liberal-inclined *TYC* saw a photograph featuring the Indian Prime Minister Monmohan Singh shaking hands with the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao 温家宝 – with his left hand – they disregarded the symbol of friendship behind the gesture and blamed the Indian leader for “using his dirty hand.”²⁷

Although one or two spontaneous positive posts on Indian hygiene can be found, the “dirty” perception of India has indisputable prominence in the minds of Chinese netizens.²⁸ Taking all this into account, racism towards India

19 Message ID 93663485#2, *SNF*. Message ID 93664003, *SNF*.

20 Message ID 1354243 #7, *FBF*.

21 Message ID 306752 #6, *FBF*.

22 Message ID 29715 #28, *BCN*. Message ID 2178657 #9, *CIB*.

23 Message ID 1722889 #6, *FBF*. Message ID 1529660 #13, *FBF*.

24 Xuan Zhuang, *Datang xiyi ji*, p. 876b.

25 Message ID 1088563 #3, *FBF*.

26 Message ID 1088563 #1, *FBF*.

27 Message ID 167038, *TYC*.

28 Message ID 2278124 #1, *SNF*.

is shown to be deeply rooted in the online Chinese community. However, given the fact that the Indians are more discriminated against than the darker-skinned Africans, racism alone cannot fully explain the reasons behind the stereotype.

Parallel poverty and development: India cannot overtake China

In response to the second proposition about India's economic development, another common stereotype used by most Chinese netizens about India is poverty. To almost all Chinese netizens, India is like any other third world country with no economic miracles taking place at all: "India has the largest slums in Asia, the likes of which cannot be found in any Chinese city."²⁹ Some comments, including those from the liberal-inclined *PNF*, go as far as claiming that the majority of the entire Indian population is composed of paupers or beggars.³⁰

Whether India will ever catch up with China one day is one of the hottest topics for the internet community. Not surprisingly, the dominant view is that India can never be compared with China in terms of economic development, because the former still needs to spend time dealing with its widespread poverty while the latter is already internationalizing its economy.³¹ The common viewpoint from these users is that "India is crawling behind China, eating the Chinese dust," and after ten years, "the economies of China and India will never reach the point of intersection because the distance between them will become greater and greater."³² In other words, to the Chinese netizens the rise of the Indian economy is a distant dream: "if she keeps being arrogant, she will even be left behind Vietnam."³³ The online views on this topic are far less prudent than the exhibited Chinese academic viewpoints, even though their sentiments are pretty much the same. The most fabulous achievement of the Indian economy – information technology and software development – is also ignored by the Chinese netizens even though they might be its direct beneficiaries.

When speaking of the reasons for the inherent problems in India's development, the new leftist-inclined netizens imply that they originate from the structural demerits of India's chaotic democratic system and the country's inherent cultural problems; the Indians are said to be "chained by certain local philosophies and religious beliefs."³⁴ Facetiously commenting that the only thing India can pass China with is her population, they clearly endorse China's one-child policy, pointing out that India failed to implement anything similar even during the Indira Gandhi era.³⁵ The following new leftist opinion is particular worthy of exploration:

29 Message ID 42607 #105, *PF*.

30 Message ID 3454720 #1, *PNF*.

31 Message ID 355875 #34, *PF*.

32 Message ID 209497, *TYC*. Message ID 3303358 #1, *PNF*.

33 Message ID 426072 #23, *PF*.

34 Message ID 167002, *TYC*.

35 Message ID 426072 #85, *PF*. Message ID 426072 #39, *PF*. Message ID 426072 #73, *PF*.

As long as India is unable to experience those painful struggles and the Cultural Revolution that China has suffered, she will never anneal her national willpower and clear away the remaining feudalistic influence. Without tough leaders like Mao Zedong or Deng Xiaoping, India could never surpass China!³⁶

The users who made this statement may not be aware of it, but this comparison did not originate in China but was made by India's very own scholar and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, who credits Mao's tough measures for clearing all the hurdles for Deng's future reforms.³⁷ Since the issue of India's poverty correlates to how China's authoritarian system can be evaluated, this is where the online liberals and new leftists should exhibit their strongest disagreement. However, what we find is that the online Chinese liberals rarely defend India's democracy in the way they do American democracy. This is probably partly because the new leftists and the liberals do not have strong disagreements on the subject of India's poverty.

As a footnote, when this topic was being discussed we found a number of postings strangely acknowledging the “decent living standard,” “conditions that are more civilized than China” and “its identity as a place where the wealthy should head for” about India from various forums, including the *SNF*.³⁸ But when these discourses were closely examined, we found that they are normally only meant as satire and to contrast with the problems of China, especially social inequality. For instance, one called India “the heaven of the poor” only in order to criticize the lack of satisfactory public medical insurance in contemporary China, which is echoed by many.³⁹ These unexpected positive descriptions of India may originate from the nationalist fortresses and contribute to the original stereotype. It is because the intended effect of the irony is to compare China's domestic politics with a badly failed state, which should have never beaten China in the conventional Chinese mentality.

India, alone, as an incompetent military challenger

In response to the third proposition, Chinese netizens from all persuasions, except for a few acquainted with the military, do not give any distinction to Indian military performance as the scholars do. For the entire online community including the liberals, India was the clear loser in the Sino-Indian border war of 1962, and since then Indian military capability has often been looked down upon.⁴⁰ This image is from time to time reinforced: for instance, after suffering co-ordinated terrorist attacks in 2008, India has again been demoted to a third-tier nation, leading a few Chinese users to go as far as to regard India's security forces as weaker than China's during the Second World War.⁴¹ Given that there are so

36 Message ID 426072 #76, *PF*.

37 Amartya Kumar Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 260.

38 Message ID 18314771 #1, *SNF*. Message ID 87784687 #1, *SNF*.

39 Message ID 392668 #1, *PF*.

40 Message ID 3562936 #1, *PNF*. Message ID 3567032 #91, *PNF*.

41 Message ID 3477290 #16, *PNF*.

many poor people in India, these users often suspect the quality of the Indian army and assume that an Indian military upgrading would amount to merely “loud thunder, tiny rain” (*leishengda, yudianxiao* 雷声大, 雨点小).⁴² Whenever India releases any item of news on achievements made by its army or navy, the netizens tend to regard it as “mere bluffing,” believing that India “would be completely devastated” if she started a war with China.⁴³

When India launched its outer-space satellite project, netizens still doubted the country’s capability of achieving this, or claimed that its military technology was not home-grown in India but imported.⁴⁴ Even the postures adopted by the Indian military are satirized as exhibiting “foolishly conceited persons” who act like attention-seeking “dancing clowns” for fear that others might ignore them.⁴⁵ A large part of this stereotype originates from India’s poverty, as previously discussed: many users think India should deal with its multitudinous poor first before talking up the navy, and in doing so imply that China has more or less resolved its own poverty issue.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, the fact that the Indian military has made significant improvements since the 1962 defeat is noted by those netizens who pay attention to military news. In November 2008, the Indian navy destroyed a Somali pirate vessel while patrolling the Gulf of Aden; news such as this did temporarily dismiss some of the Chinese reservations about Indian capability. For instance, one user exclaimed, “the Indian navy has destroyed a Somali pirate ship in the Gulf of Aden! If other navies sailed there, they would probably be hijacked or bombarded.”⁴⁷ One even went further to suggest that “China will have to import Indian missiles and satellite technology one day. I can bet that India will, before China, invent the level ten aircraft.”⁴⁸

However, these are uncharacteristic comments that comprise less than 10 per cent of the relevant postings. When, in talking about the Somali mission, one user remarks that the Chinese navy has yet to achieve anything despite being deployed in the same area since 2009, he still manages to downplay the Indian performance by saying: “An ox-cleaver is not for killing chickens. That’s why we [the Chinese] did not go to war with the Somali pirates. Only the low ranking soldiers or bandits (*louluo* 喽啰) like the Indian navy would be eager to take on that job.”⁴⁹

Interestingly, those who highlight India’s military mightiness are not necessarily implying favouritism towards India; it might just be the users’ ploy to provoke xenophobia. Likewise, those downplaying the military importance of India

42 Message ID 3523548 #17, *PNF*.

43 Message ID 3567032 #146, *PNF*.

44 Message ID 426072 #30, *PF*.

45 Message ID 3477290 #9, *PNF*. Message ID 3523548 #3, *PNF*.

46 Message ID 3567032 #110, *PNF*. Message ID 3567032 #88e, *PNF*.

47 Message ID 89506631 #1, *SNF*.

48 Message ID 91039362 #4, *SNF*.

49 Message ID 89560747 #1, *SNF*.

sometimes lead to suggestions benefiting Sino-Indian harmony. For instance, from the point of view of future macro Asian integration, some netizens suggest China should co-operate further with the militarily inferior India because of the latter's lack of ability to threaten China.⁵⁰ However, this view is weakly echoed online.

Legitimate challenge from India as a Western ally: encircling China

In assessing the fourth proposition, India is not entirely seen as a one-sided inferior neighbour of China. Partly because of the country's perceived poverty and inferiority, coupled with problematic Sino-Indian relations since 1962, the nationalist and new leftist Chinese netizens are alert to what they see as India's intent on revanchism. Xenophobia and anti-Western nationalism play major roles in this, because after being labelled as a tool of Western interests, India can be taken more seriously. The conventional realist belief that the primary enemies of China are the United States and Japan, with India serving as these countries' "tool," is extremely popular among forums of all categories.⁵¹ Taking this line, users suggest that India is "a servile follower" or "cannon dust" of the West, implying that Indian diplomacy has little room for independent thought.⁵² Since almost no Chinese netizens regard India as a rival on an equal footing, any achievement that it makes or any legitimate challenge that it posts on China is interpreted as being backed by the West. There is an atmosphere in which a future Sino-Indian war is seen as being inevitable because netizens think that in an effort to obstruct their own nation's rising, the West would continually offer technological and military support to India.⁵³

When they consider India's other neighbours, the nationalist netizens are aware of the suggested encirclement being imposed by India on China. For instance, since Bhutan is in reality controlled, or "protected," by India, netizens leaving messages about Bhutan either view its king as a dummy of India or as being bullied by Indian imperialism, resulting in the suggestion of wiping India out of the kingdom.⁵⁴ Tied to this, the precedent of India's annexation of Sikkim in 1975, which is relatively little noted in the Western virtual world, is surprisingly well discussed by the online Chinese in all forums. Similar sentiments can be found about Indian intrusion into Nepal.⁵⁵ There are also warnings against other Chinese neighbours such as Vietnam building an alliance with India.⁵⁶ A few go as far as calling for preparation to punish any future Indian–Japanese alliance.⁵⁷ Approximately one-half of the postings concerning

50 Message ID 84519636, *SNF*. Message ID 9368277, *SNF*. Message ID 4080724, *PNF*.

51 Message ID 3358568 #10, *PNF*.

52 Message ID 430200 #8, *PF*. Message ID 3118130 #21, *PNF*.

53 Message ID 3534189 #40, *PNF*.

54 Message ID 2461105, *SNF*. Message ID 92632777, *SNF*. Message ID 92711694, *SNF*.

55 Message ID 96366718, *SNF*. Message ID 96662460, *SNF*.

56 Message ID 91003595, *SNF*. Message ID 92307358, *SNF*.

57 Message ID 96013871, *SNF*.

Indian–Western relations propose that “it is the right time to stand up and show the sword” to the Indians.⁵⁸ Although these views might not be supported by the liberals, there is not much sign of their defence, partly because making concessions on sovereignty to a perceived inferior country like India would be harder to accept than making direct concessions to the West, even among the liberals.

Tibet and Taiwan: China should fight against India-backed separatism

In regard to the fifth proposition, perceiving the post-1962 revanchism-seeking India as an enemy against Chinese unification and irredentism receives the strongest response in the online community. Again, the nationalists take their usual stance and the liberals remain relatively muted. The Indian border dispute itself already receives much attention, as many users eloquently recite the official line, which can be taken more seriously on provocation.⁵⁹ After Shashi Tharoor, then Minister of State for External Affairs of India, stated that “India’s territorial integrity is not negotiable” in November 2009, for instance, a lot of angry Chinese netizens reminded Beijing that the territorial dispute in “Southern Tibet” (*zangnan* 藏南), which is currently administered by Delhi as the province of Arunachal Pradesh, could not be settled by negotiation.⁶⁰

More irritating to these netizens is the fact that India accommodates the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan refugees in Dharamsala, pushing them to see India as being behind the Tibetan separatist movement as well as the recent unrest throughout Tibet.⁶¹ A few even angrily accuse the Indians of attempting to support Taiwan and Xinjiang independence, suggesting that India is behind a large-scale anti-Chinese unification plot.⁶² The existence of this conspiracy is not surprising considering the fact that territorial disputes over Tibet and “Southern Tibet” in India are seen by many Chinese netizens as inter-related: the Indian policy to support the Dalai Lama and let him preach in “Southern Tibet” is not only seen as Delhi’s support of Tibetan independence but also read as its careful plot to persuade the international community that the region indisputably belongs to India.⁶³

As a result, the call from netizens to take serious measures against the Indians for China’s unification and irredentist clauses is found from all forums; the only difference is the degree of magnitude. Pakistan is considered a key card for China on the diplomatic table against India, and the Sino-Pakistani alliance receives great support from the Chinese netizens: a survey conducted in December 2007

58 Message ID 3549699 #24, *PNF*.

59 Message ID 3303358 #25, *PNF*.

60 “Shashi Tharoor has mentioned that the Dalai Lama’s presence in India is irritating China,” *The India Server*, 11 November 2009; Message ID 95706547 #1, *SNF*.

61 Message ID 95654789, *PNF*.

62 Message ID 91003595, *SNF*. Message ID 92307358, *SNF*.

63 Message ID 4080724, *PNF*.

showed that the friendliest nation among China's neighbours, in the eyes of netizens, was Pakistan.⁶⁴ In order to fight back against India diplomatically, the relatively moderate netizens call for India's return to Pakistan of its occupied lands in Kashmir.⁶⁵ More interestingly, in 2009, a rumour began in China about an alleged official attempt to split India into several nations, which was released after the 13th Sino-Indian border talks. Even the liberal-inclined *TYC* discussed it vigorously with excitement.⁶⁶

On top of these diplomatic initiatives, regarding China as "the only one who can stop Indian imperialism by striking Indian troops in 'Southern Tibet'," the more radical netizens propose fighting back by using a strong Chinese military force to recover the entire region.⁶⁷ Such radicalism is normally restrained, but is easily triggered when the Chinese are provoked. For instance, when India strengthened its deployment in the province of Arunachal Pradesh in November 2008, its military officials publicly warned that if China interfered, they would bomb Chinese military bases. This greatly angered the Chinese netizens and there were hundreds of responses in one single day. The following quotation represents their general sentiment:

Nations surrounding us are nibbling at our territory. If we fail to stop this conduct, we will be killed, bite by bite. We have no route by which to retreat. In order to secure our land, we can only fight back ... They always believe that they can take advantage of us; therefore we have to beat them till they are dead!⁶⁸

Ironically, an Indian-initiated strike is wanted by the Chinese online community, because it would serve as a legitimate reason for China to strike back, or at least provide a legitimate excuse for the nationalists to push their government into doing so.⁶⁹ Applying the concept of the "war of unlimited boundaries" (*chaoxianzhan* 超限战) developed by former officers of the People's Liberation Army, which calls for fighting enemies with all possible means including ecological warfare, one user from the liberal-inclined *PNF* even suggests cutting off the Brahmaputra River, which flows from China-governed south-western Tibet to India, so as to "destroy the ecology of India without using bullets" and force India to fire the first bullet against China as an aggressor.⁷⁰ Although there are netizens from *TYC* and *PNF* who show concern for humanitarianism and claim that ordinary Indian citizens should not be harmed, the mainstream perception on these forums is still

64 "Zhongguo wangmin linguo yinxiang diaocha" ("A survey on Chinese netizens' attitudes about neighbouring states"), *Guoji xianqu daobao* (*International Herald Leader*), 10 December 2007.

65 "India takes her own ill effects: Nepal requests India to return one third of invaded territory!" blog entitled *Return of the King*, 2008, <http://junshi.blog.china.com/200812/4138202.html>.

66 Message ID 227274, *TYC*.

67 Message ID 95706547 #4 and 5, *SNF*. Message ID 3454754 #13, *PNF*.

68 Message ID 11937005, *RF*. Message ID 3887672, *CIB*.

69 Message ID 3485334 #4, *PNF*.

70 Qiao Liang and Wong Xiangsiu *Chaoxian zhan* (*War of Unlimited Boundaries*) (Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 1999). Message ID 3485334 #3, *PNF*.

weighted to the other side.⁷¹ To the Chinese, of course, the outcome of any future anti-Indian irredentist conflict is obvious: “the ignorance of ‘*asan*’ and their over-expanding nationalist dream should be easily crushed.”⁷²

Lack of passion towards a Sino-Indian strategic partnership

In response to the sixth proposition, it is of little surprise that if a Sino-Indian strategic partnership does not involve issues of sovereignty, rational support online in a ratio that doubles the usual one-tenth margin, including in the nationalist *SNF*, can be found. For instance, some netizens argue that a Sino-Indian partnership would lead to future Asian integration.⁷³ Since China and India “always share glory and disgrace” and “rise and fall together,” some suggest forming an alliance based on the premises that “there are no eternal enemies but eternal interests” and an “alliance could bring a win-win situation.”⁷⁴

However, doubts about Sino-Indian friendship greatly increase when the issue of sovereignty is discussed. In addition, the majority of Chinese netizens also dismiss India as a capable ally: “why should China be willing to negotiate with India when it is superior and can hold off India?”⁷⁵ In times of peace, support for Sino-Indian friendship, if not a partnership, receives spontaneous positive attention, but when sensitive border issues break out or there is unrest in India, attention is immediately diverted. The following concluding remark from a *TYC* user is representative of comments about the term *Chindia*: “lumping China and India together is merely academically false.”⁷⁶

Conclusion: Interaction between Virtual and Reality

The image of India in the online Chinese community is relatively homogenous when compared with the controversial and diffusive image of the United States and Japan as created by the same users. Considering the fact that the usual liberal–nationalist demarcation is not easily seen, apart from the one-tenth exceptions, it is time to answer the research questions related to the interaction between online perceptions and offline reality, including: what pattern can we observe for the radical anti-Indian messages in China and do they present challenges to Beijing; why is there such a gap between the virtual reality and Beijing’s policy; how does the party-state respond to the messages; and how might Beijing’s India policy be influenced by the online perceptions in the future?

71 Message ID 3874558, *PNF*.

72 Message ID 3485334 #15, *PNF*.

73 Message ID 84519636, *SNF*. Message ID 9368277, *SNF*. Message ID 4080724, *PNF*.

74 Message ID 227308, *TYC*. Message ID 231643, *TYC*.

75 Message ID 228018, *TYC*.

76 Message ID 167002, *TYC*.

Pattern of anti-Indian messages: challenging Beijing?

Filled with hostility and contempt for India, with the exception of the one-tenth holding different views (who are not necessarily liberals), Chinese netizens from the various forums are generally more nationalistic, xenophobic, chauvinistic and realist-oriented than the official policy. The strongest anti-Indian messages involve border disputes and issues relating to sovereignty. This is exemplified by the 2008 border dispute and the Dalai Lama's visit to "Southern Tibet" in 2009, which triggered ten times the normal number of postings on India. When Sino-Indian relations are harmonious, such messages are less evident, and criticism of Beijing's Indian policy in the economic, social and cultural fronts are also relatively mild. Even though the Chinese might not regard India as a partner on an equal footing, further economic co-operation, as proposed by Beijing, does not so easily trigger resentment.

However, on the military front, it is not uncommon to find netizens blaming Beijing for being too restrained and not doing enough. A discrepancy is clearly evident between the netizens' aggressive suggestions and Beijing's policy that calls for more a prudent reaction to India by behaving as a responsible power. Since the Chinese perceive India – unlike the US or Japan – as an inferior nation, they find it very hard to accept any insult from the country. In other words, the populist online pressure mounted against Beijing over Indian matters could be stronger than the anti-US or anti-Japanese sentiment if Beijing were to yield any concession to Delhi.

Public discussion: structural origins of online Chinese nationalism

Why are the online messages in China more radical than the offline reality and Beijing's official policy? In Sino-US relations, this peculiarity of "one country, two narratives" can first be explained by the fact that among the intellectual circle in China, the major field of battle features the new leftists on one side and the liberals on the other. Since the late 1990s, the new leftists – who believe that the central state should play a more important role – and the nationalists have forged a strategic alliance, resulting in the convergence of statist and nationalist sentiments. In online discussion, sovereignty is a very popular topic, and any discussions on sovereignty immediately receive new leftist backup. However, in the case of India, the online nationalist-liberal demarcation is less obvious, and so further reasons have to be explored.

A more structural explanation is that glittering internet technology has provided a new field in which to revise Habermas's public sphere model, with the online Chinese community today constructing an important public platform for discourse in the authoritarian state. The function of the internet in domestic and international politics and how the tool makes it difficult for authoritative regimes like China to "maintain hegemony over the domestic supply of information and political pluralism" has received much focus in recent

years.⁷⁷ Yet, most of the time, these challenges are indirect and subtle, as dissidents use the strategy of “kicking the ball from the side” (*dachabianqiu* 打擦边球) to criticize the party-state by focusing on remote topics not related to home.⁷⁸ That partly explains the extremely hot discussion in the online Chinese community on global issues, as the strategy of “using the nationalist flag against the red flag” – criticizing a government which mobilizes patriotism for not being patriotic enough, so that domestic issues like wealth inequality or social security can be brought up under the framework of comparative politics – has been present in other domains like Sino-US or Sino-Japanese relations.⁷⁹ In this regard, Sino-Indian relations are little different, except for the fact that any concession towards India would be harder to take. In describing the “non-government sponsored ideology and movement that has originated, existed, and developed in China’s online sphere over the past decade starting from 1994,” Xu Wu adopted the term “Chinese cyber nationalism” and predicted two possible outcomes of the movement: to be “diluted, restructured and absorbed” as a tool of the official doctrine, or to shape the future power structure of the government.⁸⁰ Either way, this independent phenomenon of Chinese politics can be expected to play an even greater role in the future.

Management of the party-state towards anti-Indian messages

When Beijing is faced with challenges presented by the internet community, there are obvious differences in its attitude towards domestic and international heresies. As the Golden Shield system devised by the Chinese government to secure internet discipline is functioning effectively, it would be difficult for ordinary messages to be sustained online were they causing real trouble to the party-state. Most messages which relate to the rights protection movement concerned with human rights in China, for instance, are subjected to different levels of censorship and a few prominent online activists have even been prosecuted.

However, no reports can be found of the prosecution of netizens for criticizing the party-state for being diplomatically too weak. The party-state does impose constraints on excessive radical messages or internet-mobilized movements when they go widely against national interests, such as after the anti-US demonstration in response to the Belgrade Embassy Bombing in 1999, the anti-Japanese demonstration in 2005 and the anti-French movement before the Beijing Olympics in 2008. Extreme nationalist comments are also purged online from

77 Geoffrey Taubman, “A not-so world wide web: the internet, China, and the challenges to nondemocratic rule,” *Political Communication*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (1998), p. 268.

78 Michael Chase and James Mulvenon, *You’ve Got Dissented! Chinese Dissidents Use of Internet and Beijing’s Counter-Strategies* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2002).

79 Simon Shen, “Holding nationalist flags against red flags,” *East Asia: An International Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (2007), pp. 229–50.

80 Xu Wu, *Chinese Cyber Nationalism: Evolution, Characteristics and Implications* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), pp.155, 212.

time to time: for instance, the anti-US messages immediately after 9-11 in *SNF* were totally removed from its archive. Nevertheless, compared with other dissidents, extreme nationalists are yet to be regarded as a major threat towards the regime, because after all, they are endorsing the mandate of the Chinese Communist Party to rule, including its allegation to represent the “progressive course of China’s advanced culture” – which is often referred to as patriotism – in the “Three Represents” (*sange daibiao* 三个代表) theory. Since some room is needed for the Chinese to express different opinions from the official line, the party-state seems to give tacit approval to this online jingoist front, including towards India. Since Beijing is capable of applying restraints when it wants to, the fact that none has been imposed on the anti-Indian messages could be read as Beijing’s judgment that such messages have yet to cause substantial setbacks to Sino-Indian relations. Or, as Xu pointed out, the party-state might have already “diluted, restructured and absorbed” these messages into its Indian policy by relying partly on them to exert certain pressure on India. Yet, as the final section describes, the impact of these messages on Sino-Indian relations may be more profound.

Possible impact of online perceptions in Sino-Indian relations

Nationalism is always a double-edged sword. As Beijing has granted more room to anti-Indian netizens when compared with other domestic dissidents or xenophobic movements which target other countries, it will be impossible to maintain anti-Indian activism totally within governmental control. The coexistence of the unfriendly online image of India, a country perceived as being inferior, might suggest far-reaching implications for future Sino-Indian relations.

Although during times of peace, Chinese netizens would not post strong criticism of Beijing’s call for developing a partnership with India, the online image of India would in real life inevitably have a knock-on effect on their bilateral social and cultural exchanges. One phenomenon which illustrates this is that Chinese women who socialize with Indian men are usually described online as making bad choices. For instance, an online post from a Chinese female user asserting that she loved her Indian boyfriend “whose quality is not below par” received numerous attacks:

It is not unreasonable that 95 per cent of Chinese fail to accept marriage between Chinese and Indians. Which hand does “*asan*” use to touch you? ... if they forget to wash hands, what would you do?

There are so many males in China, why are you prejudiced to choose “*asan*”? It would be so ugly to give birth to a junior “*asan*” in the future. You must regret it!⁸¹

While these comments cannot offer sophisticated theories to understand India, they are sufficient to accumulate peer pressure against fellow Chinese developing

81 Message ID 29715 #45,46,50, *BCN*.

friendships with Indians at a civic level. Nowadays, few Chinese have Indian friends.

In addition, few users bother to appreciate the beauty of India's rich culture as their ancestors once did a thousand years ago. This is in sharp contrast to the eagerness of the Chinese netizens to learn from Western and Japanese culture despite the prevalent nationalist sentiments against the US and Japan. This lack of interest could be a drawback on the economic front, as it discourages Chinese businessmen from developing personal-based, instead of institution-based, economic ties with the Indians; at present, such business contact largely involves the upper echelon of wealthy Indians only. Expressions of displeasure in dealing with Indian merchants are repeatedly posted by the Chinese online, especially on the business-oriented forum *FBF*.⁸²

Whether Sino-Indian economic interaction without a sincere appreciation of each other's cultural and social background can be sustainable is questionable. As Beijing tacitly allows, if not directly encourages, the above messages to gain momentum online, any party-state attempt to regard India as a partner on an equal footing would be constrained by populist pressure and result in less reporting of Sino-Indian friendship talks compared with other Sino-foreign strategic partnerships. Beijing's capability to push forward the concept of *Chindia* integration in a less ad hoc basis would also be constrained.

The impact can go beyond the mere perceptible level. Seeing India as an inferior challenger, some Chinese netizens have taken to inflicting their own sort of damage. It is estimated that thousands of Indian websites are attacked by Chinese hackers every year.⁸³ In April 2008, the Indian intelligence agency asserted that Chinese hackers were trying to break into the computer network of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, eventually compelling Delhi to consider implementing a new defensive system for its official information technology.⁸⁴ This serves as an extra hindrance for Delhi when trying to recognize the friendly gestures made by Beijing, as it is difficult for the Indians to believe that the Chinese hackers – living in an authoritarian nation – are not supported institutionally. If the systems being hacked are those of the Indian government, such suspicion is further reinforced. With the precedent of the anti-Japanese demonstration in 2005, which was mobilized by online discussion, the cyber attacks against India illustrate the future potential of Chinese netizens to mobilize anti-Indian demonstrations in real life whenever necessary.

Perhaps the most important of all consequences of our findings is the fact that the Chinese netizens have made India their *bête noir* for their government. Their greatest fear and potential embarrassment is that India should overtake China in any way. At present, Chinese concern over any possible Indian direct aggression is less than that felt by Delhi, but that does not mean the Chinese treat the

82 Message ID 1354243 #7, *FBF*.

83 Hari Sud, "Chinese and US lead information warfare," *UPI Asia.com*, 17 July 2009.

84 "China's cyber warfare against India," *Indian Post*, 23 June 2008.

Indians casually. Yes, there are other nations perceived by the Chinese nationalists as arch rivals, such as the United States or Japan. There are also nations, such as those in Africa, seen as inferior. The Chinese would be humiliated if they were defeated by the Americans or the Japanese either militarily or economically, but because they see these potential opponents as having an advanced culture, the damage to national pride would still be contained at one level. They would also be embarrassed if they were surpassed by the Africans economically, but the chance of this happening in the foreseeable future is highly unlikely. India is perhaps the only major nation which is perceived as culturally and socially inferior on the one hand, but capable of offering a legitimate challenge to China – with proven realist intention – on the other. Because of this, any economic, military or territorial defeat by the Indians would be seen as an unacceptable face-loss for the online Chinese nationalists and could have fatal consequences for the party-state. As a result, concessions are less likely to be made by Beijing towards Delhi than towards Washington, Tokyo or any developing nation in Africa.

Fortunately, there is a final more positive observation, namely the fact that the aggressive messages against India are mostly reactive in nature. If there were to be a border dispute along “Southern Tibet,” like the spy plane collision in the South China Sea between China and the United States in 2001, a vigorous response from the internet can certainly be expected, which might impose a certain pressure on Beijing to take harder measures against the Indians. However, when no imminent threats are presented by Delhi, the Chinese netizens do not show the same enthusiasm for aggressive action towards India. Because of this, coupled with the fact that the Sino-Indian declaration was not rejected outright online, it is unlikely that Beijing would be pressured to initiate a harder line on India during times of normality, which is good news for the prophets and fans of the virtual concept of *Chindia*.

To sum up, in order to rebuild mutual trust between China and India, the online Chinese perceptions of India shown in this article should be, at least partially, turned around by collective efforts of the government, the media and academia. No matter whether various Sino-Indian disputes are resolved or not, these players have the responsibility to reshape public opinion. If Beijing seriously wishes to develop a closer institutional relationship with India, it should not do so in an ad hoc manner that depends on the political weather, but should put the creation and construction of more positive images of India for the public at large on the party-state’s agenda. Failure to recognize this means that *Chindia* not only remains a distant dream, but could also be replaced by an eventual Sino-Indian cold war.