

The Quotidian Concern and Racial Belonging of Brazilian Chinese: A Study of BrasilCN.com

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Abstract

Benedict Anderson regards nation as a socially constructed “imagined community.” The imaginative nature of the nation implies the possibility of shifting personal belonging to a geographically identified area from reality to a virtual network shared by the people who hold the same self-identification. The development of websites that serve Chinese diaspora reinforces the overseas Chinese’s emotional and epistemological connection to mainland China. By analyzing BrasilCN.com 巴西華人網, which is the first Chinese-language website that has offered news, quotidian information and forum communication to Brazilian Chinese since 2009, this research paper will structurally reveal how its selected provision of knowledge related to China and its forum platform for group conversation deliver a sense of racial support that differentiates the users from local Brazilians. It holds an argument that the intersectionality of the identity of Brazilian Chinese causes the hybridity of the content of BrasilCN.com and creates a demand for connecting between two sides, instead of solely solving daily problems of living in Brazil or reminiscent problems of being physically isolated from China. The posted information reveals that the users’ requests related to Brazil and China are imbalanced. There are tensions between localization and cultural estrangement.

Keywords: Brazilian Chinese, mainland China, BrasilCN.com, networking, culture, communication

1. Internetization and the Virtual Narrative of BrasilCN.com

Internetization, since the technical development of protocols for internet-working in the late 1960s, delivers a sense of minimizing geographical constraints for communicative production of knowledge. It was at first academic, quantitative, and pragmatic in nature, and later, especially following

the advancement of Web 2.0 techniques, becomes penetrative, covering all the quotidian aspects and fostering transnational imagination. Internetization not only externally fosters capitalism and modernization towards global standardization, but also subjectively moulds personal preferences and cultural recognition. In *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson suggests that the deep and horizontal comradeship founded on imagination of a shared nation, despite “actual inequality and exploitation”, makes the nation a community (1991: 6-7). On the one hand, internetization is replacing the national boundaries with the inter-connective domains, and the geographically given fraternity with transnational self-identification; on the other hand, it consolidates national identity and diversifies its significance through production of public information and networks. The Internet space is distant from the real geographical space, but in the realm of imagination, it replicates and supplements the existence of reality, and creates new logic of maintaining or disintegrating imagined communities. As Anderson attributes the creation of imagined communities to “print capitalism”, the “virtual capitalism” that the Internet made possible creates “nations” via its rapid, fragment and omnipresent dissemination of signifiers through screen, which is more efficient and effective than print.

The conceptual development of “nation” and “nationalism” is not purely government-oriented. Public engagement is also significant. Not only local public engagement but also overseas engagement, be it by diasporas or foreigners, identifies and differentiates between imagined national borders in all aspects. Websites are worth examining as they actualize the ambiguity of personal identity that is invisible within the clear-cut national borders. In this research paper, BrazilCN.com is the target for analysis. It is a byproduct of virtual capitalism, relying on advertisement income to sustain its operation. Its business model is based on Brazilian Chinese’s consumption of information related to China and Brazil, earning from the ethnic Chinese’s ambivalence of migration and settlement in Brazil. Studying this website can offer a transcultural perspective beyond an understanding of the physical flow of population and the local interaction of Chinese residents/immigrants in reality.

According to Shu Chang-sheng’s 東長生 literature review, there were around 250,000 to 280,000 ethnic Chinese in Brazil in 2012 (2018: 37). His study notices that birthplace, duration of stay, legal status in Brazil can influence the statistic result of the population of Brazilian Chinese, revealing the fluidity of being ethnic Chinese in Brazil. On the online platforms, identity is free from identification due to the anonymity of Internet users. Netizens can develop their belonging to the virtual space with familiar language and culture, regardless of the complexity of identity politics. BrazilCN.com, claiming to be the largest Brazilian Chinese online platform, acts as a

private home beyond collective constitution of the sense of public, national and geographical belonging, in which one can freely participate in identity fixation and variation. There are other websites similarly serving Brazilian Chinese, such as Brazilhr.com 巴西華人資訊網, 25jie.com.br 25街華人網站, and Bxqw.com 巴西僑網. BrazilCN.com is only a typical example that deserves close analysis.

Regarding BrazilCN.com as a holistic narrative, one can deem it a story of adaptation, nostalgia, and struggling for success. In the view of Marie-Laure Ryan, story is a “cognitive construct”. Unlike “discourse” which is “a representation encoded in material signs”, it is “a mental image” that “concerns certain types of entities and relations between these entities” (2008: 347). In the case of BrazilCN.com, its structural design and posts reflects the web administrators’ intention and their implicit relational understandings of Brazil and China, corresponding to their readers’ expectation. The default language of the website as simplified Chinese has foregrounded the story as centralized on mainland China, or the People’s Republic of China, instead of Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, or pre-Second-World-War China, which use Traditional Chinese as the official language. In contrast, Brazilhr.com uses Traditional Chinese and is Taiwan-focused, revealing a different ideological emphasis, and another story of ethnic Chinese.

There are more narrative details on the home page of BrazilCN.com. As shown in Figure 1, the title bar, supposed to show the most important categories of information, includes the titles “homepage”, “information”, “index”, “demand and supply”, “property”, “recruitment”, “events” and “posting”. Three of the titles (“demand and supply”, “property”, “recruitment”) are related to business activities, and other four titles except “homepage” contain resources that can assist career development of Brazilian Chinese. On the right of the homepage, there are eye-catching icons with explanations: “reading news”, “job searching”, “flat searching”, “lawyer searching”, “event organizing”, “help seeking”, “goods-transportation seeking”, “air ticket purchasing”, “friends making”. These icons show the panoramic care of the website for the Brazil Chinese, especially the new immigrants or short-stay workers from mainland China. BrazilCN.com aims to help the fresh “Brazilian” to settle down with local news, suitable jobs, accommodation, interpersonal networks, and legal help. However, the icon for buying air ticket reveals that the Brazilian Chinese intend to not only grasp information for adapting to an exotic life, but also to return to or keep visiting China. The significance of Brazil for the visitors of BrazilCN.com appears to be a place for individually developing careers and collectively constructing an ethnic power based on commercial success, rather than a nation that could alter one’s patriotic commitment to China. An especially interesting piece of information is that the weather of Guangzhou is offered beneath the nine

Figure 1 The Home Page of BrazilCN.com



icons. As the visitors of BrazilCN.com are supposed to be Chinese currently staying in Brazil or preparing to go to Brazil, the weather of the major cities of Brazil would be more relevant. Furthermore, Guangzhou is merely the capital city of Guangdong province, not of the People's Republic of China. Although the villagers of Taishan, Guangdong, has occupied 7 per cent of the total population of ethnic Chinese in Brazil,¹ the weather information of Guangzhou (which is around 200km apart from Taishan) is too geographically limited. This reveals the disunity and sometimes irrelevancy of information delivered to the targeted netizens.

Mi Su-min 密素敏 examined the features of adaptation of overseas Chinese to Brazilian society in her journal paper, and regarded running business as the key approach for them to root in Brazil. From being slaves of the Portuguese colonizers to mobile salesmen, and then to business owners (2015: 65-66), ethnic Chinese has to encounter the cultural diversity opposite to the introvert East Asian nature, the lack of political representatives, and social unrest (67-72). As a minority of the Brazilian society, ethnic Chinese

generally maintain strong internal bonding and cultural affiliation, and attempt to raise their social positions through economic activities rather than political movements. To defend their rights and facilitate business cooperation, they organise ethnic Chinese societies. Xu Wenyong 徐文永 and Xie Linsen 謝林森 had researched on the public diplomatic function of ethnic Chinese societies in Brazil. Since the establishment of the first society *Centrol Social Chinês* 巴西中華會館 in 1919, the Brazil Chinese societies worked on Chinese interpersonal networking, Chinese school, and Chinese media (2012: 19). They keep contact with the mainland Chinese government and locally promote Chinese culture for enhancing ethnic cohesion and maintaining ethnic unity. Their sensitivity to national and ethnic belongings offers an external source of discursive power that benefits the locally subordinate Chinese, including those with Brazilian citizenship.

The cutting-edge researches of Brazilian Chinese societies had not yet discovered the similar nature and significance between those societies and the online communities for Brazilian Chinese. The online communities like BrazilCN.com maintain the dominance of Chinese language as the medium to connect ethnic Chinese with various nationalities. They post news related to Brazil and China similar to the function of local newspapers run by the Brazilian Chinese societies. Besides, they more effectively organize events, release information, initiate discussions, and serve those socially inactive immigrants. Their concentrated design with a wide coverage of daily issues is what the physical presence of the Brazilian Chinese societies, like service centres, can hardly provide. With reference to framing theory, the edges and indicators of the “taleworlds” that the readers are choosing to enter is under the decisions of authors (Young, 1986). Regarding the informative and interactive domain of BrazilCN.com as a taleworld, one can interpret its web administrators and participants as determining the routinely and morally accepted plots for continuing the overseas story of the unambiguously self-identified Chinese diaspora. The BrazilCN.com belongs to web literature; whereas the speech act of the Brazilian Chinese societies is close to print literature. The former one is free and widely distributed, and is hence holding an overwhelming power to shape the social and cultural ideology of the class of netizens. It resembles “cybertext”, which Espen J. Aarseth defines as artificially designed and mechanically operated textual system that requires readers to effectuate a story from various possibilities (1997: 1-2). BrazilCN.com is a more user-centred textual mechanism, producing possibilities for the readers to grasp their own bonding to China or Brazil within the frame of Sino-centrism. Its invitation to discussions and to reflection on staying and settling avail a development of online democracy for Brazilian Chinese, despite certain limitations of expression under the surveillance of web administrators.

2. The Knowledge Production in the Realm of Orientalism and Self-Orientalism

The narrative production of BrazilCN.com is not homogeneously pointing to the sublime subject of China. The juxtaposition of news reveals the geopolitical conflicts between ethnic and corporeal belongings. The Brazilian Chinese's ethnic identity given by blood relations aroused their concern about the incidents happening to Chinese and in China; whereas their physical presence in Brazil triggers their awareness of the socio-political issues related to their everyday life. In BrazilCN.com, the key information is categorized, below the big image box of the homepage, as "hot news", "Brazilian headlines", "emigrants' information", "Brazilian encyclopaedia", "Latin American headlines", "Chinese news", and "international news". The priority of information is given to those closely surrounding the situations of Brazilian emigrants, and then, layer by layer, related to the continent that Brazil locates, the nation with the largest population size of ethnic Chinese, and then the world in general. This arrangement highlights the urgency for the Brazilian Chinese to keep updating their parochial conditions, instead of tracking the remote situations that make no difference to their local life.

The representation of BrazilCN.com is not coherent, encouraging neither localization in Brazil nor utopian attachment to China. It creates an oriental image of China not following the logic of Orientalism in the colonial context. In Edward Said's (2003) orthodox understanding, Orientalism is a condition of imperialist and colonialist interpretation of Eastern culture in the West. It differentiates and hierarchizes cultural elements due to geographical separation and asymmetric power relations. Applying Said's Orientalism to understand BrazilCN.com, one can suppose that the website is under stereotypical production by web administrators in the West, and it presents Chinese images and concepts in a way subordinate to those of the West. It is an imagined object for the Western Chinese to interpret and consume, and is founded on reinterpretation and misinterpretation due to the lack of first-hand analysis of the Chinese context. Furthermore, Western methodology has framed the operation and knowledge display of the website, which compulsorily follows a systematic and logical Western routine that may undermine the possibility of using a subjective Chinese critical tradition to deliver a specific sense of Chineseness.

A big question upon the interpretation above is: Are Brazilian Chinese Westerners? For the Brazilian Chinese whose birthplace is Brazil and received Portuguese education, they might be "yellow" outside and "white" inside (like what Frantz Fanon titled his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) for situating the specific condition of the black who receive white colonizers' education). Their preconception of China and Chinese may

follow the genealogy of Oriental imagination of the West. Even with factual understanding and frequent field-trip visiting, the Western methodology and local discursive formation can still form a biased organization of Chinese perceptions. As a result, the native Brazilian Chinese hold a different imagination of the Orient from the fresh immigrants and the native Chinese. They take different pieces of information from BrazilCN.com to suit their own needs, and create their own ideas of China upon their biologically given identity. Moreover, the native Brazilian Chinese are different from the native Brazilian, as most of them grow up in a bilingual environment and inherit certain cultural rituals and habits. As the descendants of the colonized people, they hold an ambiguous “stereotype” in-between Said’s Orientalism and ethnic re-imagination of the Orient.

Chen Xiaomei noted that the political reforms of Deng Xiaoping, the second-generation leader of the People’s Republic of China, brought both Occidentalism and Orientalism to post-Mao Zedong China. She quotes Dai Jinhua’s argument that contemporary China was “post-socialist” rather than “post-colonial”, to specify the feature of Orientalism in the Chinese context (2002: viii). In Chen’s observation, social Westernisation in China sometimes led to self-Orientalism. That means Chinese writers might create literary works with stereotypical Oriental features based on the Western readers’ expectation. With realist exposure of local problems, the works represented China as inferior to the West, corresponding to the Western binary-opposite representation against China. In the case of BrazilCN.com, the participation of the native Chinese is supposed to be absent; however, they may geographically move to Brazil and bring their own understanding of the Orient online. Self-Orientalism and its particular kind of knowledge production can be shifting and interacting after the physical moves of individuals.

However, self-Orientalism *per se* is volatile and can be internally contradictory, changing in response to political dynamics. As the economic power of China skyrocketed in recent decades,² Chinese self-Orientalism appears no longer homogeneously related to the problematic, backward, and uncivilized side of China; it also reflects the promotion of a self-strengthening discourse against the Western hegemony on every side. BrazilCN.com contains news from sources such as *Global Times*, *People’s Daily*, China News Service, and ThePaper.cn. These media are under the mainland Chinese government’s ideological manipulation and deliver a positive image of China, resisting the Chinese intellectuals’ self-negation in the past and democratic request at present. The selection of Chinese news for irregular publication (even in only one Chinese news item posted in May, 2018)³ by the editorial team of BrazilCN.com sensitively standardizes the scope of the Oriental China within acceptable Western expectation, and this standardization filters self-recognized negative representation. On the

one hand, the news such as “Would Sino-American trade war happens? The Minister of Commerce replied powerfully” 中美会不会打贸易战? 商务部部长霸气回应 subjectively shows the diplomatic power of China and its dominant economic influence to the world. On the other hand, the news such as “Raising the threshold of individual income tax! The public issues you concern are all mentioned in the government’s work report” 个人所得税起征点将提高! 你关心的民生大事, 政府工作报告都提到了 promotes the Chinese central government’s ability to optimize public satisfaction and maintain internal harmony. Besides the news that consolidated both Chinese and foreign recognition of China as a growing superpower, the news related to accidents, tragic events, and crimes happening in China are allowed to be posted on BrazilCN.com. As an example, “To test her boyfriend’s love, she ‘kidnapped’ herself on her own, facing a tragic end” 为考验男友感情, 她自编自演一起“绑架案”, 结果悲剧了 reports on a girl’s fabricated abduction leading to criminal penalty. It permits exposure of inferior quality of certain Chinese individuals, and meanwhile stresses the prompt actions that the Chinese police took to guarantee social security.

3. Post-Orientalism and Identity Politics

The manipulation and surveillance of representing the superior China in a new geopolitical context denote disintegration of the hierarchical and binary-opposite understanding of Orientalism. Unlike the post-Orientalism that Hamid Dabashi (2009) coined to examine the postcolonial agency related to the exiling intellectuals’ counter-knowledge production in the bargaining between the United States and the Middle East, the post-Orientalism applied to the argument here focuses on the intentional representation of soft power and identities, which ambiguously encourages racial belonging to a united national entity.

On 1 February 2018, the Chinese Ministry of Public Security practised eight new measures to benefit the immigration of foreign Chinese, including extending their valid duration of stay from 1 to 5 years.⁴ These measures denote racial differentiation between Chinese foreigners and other foreigners, and recognize the geographical significance of the origin of Chinese diaspora, regardless of how many generations of them had left the mainland. This strategic connection to the Chinese settlements abroad empowers the national regime of mainland China.

BrazilCN.com claims to be established by various Brazilian Chinese organizations, but its editorial approach does not show a neutral stance between Brazil and China, Brazilian and Chinese. Corresponding to the administrative adjustment that the mainland Chinese government made to blur its national borders for the foreign Chinese, it internalizes the Chinese identity,

resisting homogeneous localization and cultural hybridity. While maintaining quotidian indexes to the environment dominated by racial Brazilians, the website habitualizes the lingual and epistemic specificity of being Chinese. Moreover, it unites the Brazilian Chinese to the mainland Chinese via enabling QQ and Wechat accesses to the forum. These two applications that mainly mainland Chinese dominantly use for daily conversation could arouse a sense of virtual membership. This membership ambiguously dismantles the unfamiliarity between individuals based on the penetration of communicative techniques originated from mainland China. It assists generalization of Chinese identity against the discourses related to the independence of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Tibet.⁵ Together with the absence of those discourses in the part of Chinese news, BrazilCN.com represents a pan-Chinese community, transcending a fixed Oriental imagination.

This pan-Chinese community mainly represents identity post-Orientalism. Its ideological encouragement of settling in Brazil and developing racial bonding to the Chinese nation does not foster inter-affectional attachment in the forum of BrazilCN.com, unlike the online forums in Hong Kong, such as Hong Kong Discuss Forum, HKGolden and LIHKG, which attract local Hongkongese to share private experiences. Regardless of whether the drift of self-Orientalism carries censorship from mainland China, BrazilCN.com does not contain active interpersonal interaction. “Tieba” 貼吧, literally “the bar of posts”, which is the forum of BrazilCN.com, appears utilitarian in function. The posts of the forum are mostly related to job recruitment, property for sale or rent, and help seeking. Most of the posts received no reply, despite having been read for over 1,000 times.⁶ The contrast between the users’ active search for commercial and quotidian benefits and the apathetic attitude of the other users reveals the malfunction of BrazilCN.com to transform represented public belonging to China into private belonging to other Chinese. The implicit representation of BrazilCN.com is overall nationalist, patriotic, and diplomatically friendly towards the One China. However, the participation of the targeted Chinese depends on the utility of others, rather than racial ethos. In this case, utility is the prior and core force to evoke the imagination of the common features between different Chinese individuals. The construction of the shared idea of nation is temporarily effective and non-communicative. The desires for resolving personal needs and earning economic benefits raise the users’ sensitivity of their Chinese identity. This identity is pragmatically more significant than their Brazilian identity, as their Brazilian identity is marginal in the racial Brazilian society. Their self-recognized marginality further raises the concern about seeking for an external source of power. Their blood origin thus grants them relations with the racial Chinese strangers, enabling the development of a transnational network. Although BrazilCN.com’s forum is not active, its activity notice page reveals that Brazilian Chinese pay attention

to the racially specific events, such as Chinese singing contest, Chinese opera performance, Chinese New Year celebration, and cultural visiting to China.⁷ It might mean that Brazilian Chinese prefer communicating in reality than on the Internet. Another interpretation can be that Brazilian Chinese, or simply Chinese, generally hold a volatile, heterogeneous and situational view on being Chinese. For the anonymous netizens, being Chinese is valid only when quotidian issues urge them to search for solutions from the group of people with the same identity, or when the Chinese characters, Chinese news and information, and notices of cultural activities remind them of racial differentiation from others. Patriotism empowers the overseas Chinese identity. It is internally inserted in BrazilCN.com, but is external to the Brazilian Chinese in reality. The Brazilian Chinese could choose whether to enter a virtual space to consolidate one of their identities, and their personal configuration of the Chinese identity is unique. Globalization is merging utilitarian searches for settlement with ambiguous identification and combination of the self within diverse possibilities. The implicit propaganda and asymmetrical communication represented in BrazilCN.com project merely one facet of identity politics. Other facets deserve further exploration with sensitivity to specific technical realms and glocal circumstances.

Notes

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1. See the news report on Sina.com: "Guangdong Taishan youpian "Baxicun" luju baxi xiangqin bi cun li renkou haiduo" 广东台山有片"巴西村"旅居巴西乡亲比村里人口还多 (Guangdong Taishan with a video "There are more Brazilian immigrants from the village than the local villagers"), 7 August 2016, available at <<http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2016-08-07/doc-ifxuszpp3056387.shtml>>.
 2. Specifically, Cheng Jing 程晶 (2012) reviewed the data of China-Brazil trading from 2002 to 2010, and provided that their trade volume grew rapidly from 4.1 billion US dollars to 50 billion US dollars. From 2009, China replaced the United States' and became the largest trade partner of Brazil.
 3. See "Zhongguo xinwen" 中國新聞 (Chinese news), BrazilCN.com, 13 June 2018, available at <http://www.brazilcn.com/article/listnew_84.html> (accessed

- 13 June 2018). In comparison, there were 18 and 4 items of Chinese news posted in March and April of the same year respectively.
4. See “Starting from the next month, China will issue 5-year visa to benefit the foreign Chinese” 下月起便利外籍华人 中国发5年多次签证, available at <<http://www.sinchew.com.my/node/1722609>>.
 5. Cheng Jing (2016) studied the Association for Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China 中国和平统一促进会, and regarded the patriotic diaspora Chinese as the core force for promoting anti-independence ideas. This study reveals the intentional correspondence between some Brazilian Chinese institutions and the mainland Chinese government on the One-China issue. Those institutions deliver pro-unification messages to the local public through their controllable platforms such as BrazilCN.com.
 6. See “Tieba”, BrazilCN.com, available at <http://www.brasilcn.com/tieba_a2275_b0_c0_d0_e0_f0_g0_h0_i0_p1.html> (accessed 19 June 2018).
 7. See “Activity”, BrazilCN.com, available at <<http://www.brasilcn.com/huodong/>> (accessed 19 June 2018).

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