

Chapter 7

Youth Online Cultural Participation and Bilibili: An Alternative Form of Democracy in China?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines one of the most popular youth open platform and video site in China, Bilibili, in which instant, bullet-commenting technology is built in to enhance the participation of the online users. Facilitated by this specific interactive technology, the new form of online commenting system embedded on Bilibili allows members to post and share videos—from self-created ones to illegal Japanese animation—and to engage other participants on an equal basis. As a subcultural space, Bilibili enables youth to organize their own community. In addition, it provides the technological infrastructure for the youths to play with certain form of public discussions. In careful examination of youth cultural practice and its wrestling with commercial force particularly, this study argues that the carnivalesque in a subcultural territory, though a de-politicalized public space, embrace potentials of cultural and political resistance toward capitals and dominant power by ways of poaching and transcoding them into their own subcultural context through online chatting and comments.

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INTRODUCTION

In January 2016, a court hearing was held in a district court of Beijing. The manager of Kuaibo, a popular Chinese online video player, was sued for profiting from disseminating “indecent” video contents on the internet. As judicial procedure, court hearing has always been seen as enclosed and authoritative event in the eyes of Chinese citizens, and of course, to the so-called “outside world” as well. In most cases, court hearing in China is neither open for audition nor publicly reported for discussion. Because the court hearing stands for the ideological authority of the law and the state’s power, the participation and surveillance of the public, to a large extent, is swiped out from this whole procedure. Unexpectedly, the court hearing of Kuaibo case was unprecedentedly streamed online. The hearing lasted for two days and proceeded over twenty-hours. The whole process was aired on several mainstreamed video sites such as Tudou and Sina, and then on a subcultural video site Bilibili, which was a user-content generated website in which registered members upload their own video content—mostly relevant to Japanese animation, Korean dramas and other ACG contents—on their own channel for public discussion. The streaming on Bilibili soon attracted a huge number of youths to watch the hearing, which later turned out to become a carnivalesque where people create, entertain and celebrate jokes and myths around the case. Rapidly, the case stimulated enthusiastic discussions and participations in society at large, but still in very entertaining representation. People talked about the case online, discussing the sharp and funny conversations happened in the court debate. A quotation of the Kuaibo manager, recording his words in the court hearing, became meme online after the stream. Interesting comments, for example, “god blesses kind people” (“好人一生平安” in Chinese), flooded the comment area, and was soon transported to other Chinese social media such as *Weibo*. The court hearing *per se*, as a social event initially, became a performance, a show and party, which more or less loses some of its seriousness, but engages larger public participation in the country.

Simply speaking, the phenomenon of Kuaibo shows a tendency: Through this kind of carnival representation, the social event which was once isolated to the public now becomes visible. And the once silent public now expresses the voice. In Chinese society recently, this kind of alternative “public sphere” (Habermas, Lennox, & Lennox, 1974), which is of course entertaining, enjoyable and even market-orientated, is gradually becoming a grey-area for public discussions. In this space, affect and consumption play the core role, while a subjective of citizenship, self-expression, and social participation is also learned and expressed. Youths, who act as the “engine” of this kind of carnivalesque in the Kuaibo case, become especially important in the form of such alternative public space. To what extent do their daily cultural practices and consuming behaviors affect their view of public

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