

Revival of anti-Manchu Discourses in the Chinese Internet Popular Culture

On Chinese social media, such as Bilibili, a newly emerging anti-Qing and anti-Manchu—the ruling ethnic minority in the Qing dynasty—discourse has gradually appeared. It has served not only as a renewed lens for criticizing Qing-based cultural products but also as a force for constructing Chinese national identity.

In this paper, I will analyze why anti-Qing discourse appears on Chinese social media and categorize the different threads of anti-Manchu discourse as follows: Han cultural nationalism, anti-nepotism, and anti-Westernism. I will examine three cases to explore how different ideologemes converge and diverge: the Hanfu (Han Chinese costume) movement, the criticism of Manchurian celebrities and the Qing-based ancient costume drama, and the controversy over the historical war film *Peng Hu*.

As the movement of the revival of Chinese culture, the clothes, as one of the most visible and daily objects, have been an important part. However, what clothes can best represent the Chinese national identity is an ongoing contested field. "The new Chinese style" has become a trend for fashion industry, architecture, and all other types of design and art. One example is the viral Adidas Chinese Track Top, unofficially dubbed as "Chinese New Year" or "Tang" jacket. However, the popularity of the jacket has been under scrutiny: The design was inspired by the Manchurian costume, instead of Han costume. The controversy surrounds around the aesthetics, the cultural leadership, and national identity.

In recent decades, the *guzhuang* (ancient costume) drama has been one of the most popular genres on the Chinese screen. They offer a prism that refracts a reimagined past and constructs a sense of continuity for a country that has undergone constant transformations since the arrival of modernity. Among them, Qing, the last imperial

dynasty in Chinese history, due to its closeness to the modern period, was the prior option as the setting for the ancient costume dramas. Since the 1990s, several sensational hits set in the Qing dynasty have topped the viewer ratings, for instance, *My Fair Princess* and *Empresses in the Palace*. Nevertheless, the popularity of Manchurian themes and the disproportionately large number of Manchurian Chinese artists raise the question.

The third case is the controversy over the trailer of the historical war film *Penghu*, which depicts the warfare of the Qing dynasty conquering the Ming dynasty remnants in Taiwan. The film seems to serve the nationalist propagandist goal surrounding the status of Taiwan. Surprisingly, it aroused plenty of criticisms and therefore was suspended for screening.

Anti-Manchu discourse has not been new. It even played a great role in the 1911 Xinhai Revolution, which toppled the Qing dynasty, and laid a crucial foundation of modern Chinese nationalism. However, I aim not to situate the current anti-Manchu discourse within the genealogy of the long history of anti-Manchu discourse, but instead, the post-Reform and Opening historical period. On the one hand, increasing disbelief in the ideology of development has produced anguish over inequality; however, this frustration cannot be easily channeled through classical Marxist vocabulary in the post-revolutionary era. The online conspiracy theory of Manchurians occupying the entertainment industry and dictating the cultural production in China exudes discontent with privilege and inequality. The Anti-Manchu ethnic contention serves as a legitimate discourse to express the distrust in the cultural elites.

On the other hand, as Sino-U.S. tensions heighten, anti-Western sentiment can transform into a search for internal enemies, traitors, and scapegoats. In the online Anti-Manchu phenomenon, a noticeable narrative is to construct the connections between the Manchurian-occupied Chinese entertainment industry and the Chinese diaspora community, in particular, Taiwan and Hong Kong, often illustrated as the

places Manchurian aristocrats and capitalists flee to after the communist revolution. Here, the connection with the West/pre-revolutionary diaspora is interestingly imagined as a feudalism, imperialist, and sometimes capitalist embodiment, which causes both the decline of premodern China and the current social problems.

Similar to what Mouffe and Laclau describe populism, anti-Manchu discourse functions through a “chain of equivalence,” linking disparate demands together and constructing a common enemy. It reflects national identitarian anxieties over culture, race, and ethnicity at the intersection of a changing political and social environment.