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ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

The politics of imagining internet audiences in Taiwan

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Although the central concern in Taiwan’s audience studies is the issue of subjectivity (Hwang 2003), audience subjectivity is usually conceptualized in terms of audience’s agency as actively expressing resistance, opinions, and seeking pleasure, or passively accepting patriarchal ideologies (Chang 2011; Wei 1999). Despite theoretical calls for more contextualized studies on audience in order to overcome the active-passive dichotomy (Shaw 2000; Wei 1999), the conceptual polarization of audiences persists in internet studies following the political economic and cultural studies approaches in the West (Shaw 2000). This dichotomous thinking trickles down to popular discourses that oscillate between audiences as active citizens and audiences as a passive crowd prone to manipulation. However, popular invocations of audiences are always embedded in the anxieties, hopes, and needs of the people and the demands of the authorities.

This chapter attempts to understand how internet audiences, commonly named as xiangmin, are conceptualized and called on to enforce and/or exclude certain identities in popular discourses in Taiwan. We use two well-publicized media events, the 8 August flood disaster (known as the “88 flood disaster”) in 2009 and the Makypo event in 2012, as our sites of analysis. The materials used include the four major national newspapers (Apple Daily, Liberty Times, China Times, and United Daily News), widely circulated magazines such as Common Wealth and Business Weekly, and the inter-referential visual and written material dispersed on television and the new media. Inter-referentiality characterizes contemporary mediascape in Taiwan. The print media sets the agenda for television and the internet to solicit audience responses that are further taken up by the print media as news of social significance. As such, internet audiences’ “alternative” power usually gets recorded in print media and incorporated into mainstream discourses. This research employs discourse analysis, informed by Foucault, to analyze the power relationships that regulate the meanings of xiangmin. We focus on the inter-referentiality of
discourses in different media sites, and examine how they are ordered and rarefied according to the rules and regularities of discursive formations. We look for patterns in the naming processes as well as the rules of exclusion/inclusion that order the production of discourses (Foucault 1981). Moreover, we emphasize that discourses be analyzed through the lenses of “war” and “struggle” (Foucault 2003). The research aims to unpack the politics of naming: What and who are included and excluded? How are discourses used? Whose interests do they serve? What wars are these discourses waging? We argue that the concept of active citizenship in defining internet audiences produces subjectivities that are conducive to neoliberal reform while passive citizenship, constructed through the crowd, is used to legitimate women and the working classes’ differential access to citizen rights.

The definition of xiangmin as internet audience can be traced to a Hong Kong movie, *Hail the Judge* (九品芝麻官), by Stephen Chow. In the movie, the official judge asked Chow whether any wrongs were inflicted on him because of his position outside the crowd. Chow answered: “I am only a step forward in front of xiangmin.” Xiangmin, literally translated as rural people, refers to the crowd that lacks individuality. This definition was immediately taken up by the internet audiences as self-appellation because internet users see themselves as constituting the anonymous crowd. In a special segment named after the Hong Kong movie in the popular political comedy, *The Biggest Party of the People* (全民最大黨), the internet audience is satirized through the visual image of “jumping in and out of the crowd” – the figure of xiangmin oscillates between wanting to feel safe by jumping in (or going back to) the crowd, and wanting to make profits by jumping out of the crowd to speak. The anonymous nature of online participation makes the internet user a member of the crowd, but at the same time, it also enables audiences to voice their concerns in public spaces as citizens. As such, the concept of xiangmin as internet users is structured by the tensions and ambiguities between the crowd and citizen/individual expression. Moreover, the profit motive, as elaborated in *The Biggest Party of the People*, “jumps in” to complicate the notion of citizenship.

**Historical background**

The entwined concepts of the crowd, citizenship, and profit need to be understood within the context of nation-state building and globalization. Walby points out that “[r]ather than the notion of one critical period of ‘nation-formation’, it is more appropriate to talk of ‘rounds of restructuring’ of the nation-state. It is useful in carrying the notion of change built upon foundations which remain, and that layer upon layer of change can take place, each of which leaves its sediment which significantly affects future practices” (1994: 384). Each round of the restructuring of the nation-state changes the substance of citizenship for different groups of people, but the previous foundations also affect the way current citizenship is articulated. The first round of the restructuring of the nation-state can be traced to the Japanese colonial period in which Taiwan was built as part of the Japan empire in the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries. The second round took place after the Second World War, when the Kuomintang (KMT) Party, supported by the US, moved the Republic of China from China, founded in 1911, to Taiwan, and vowed to build Taiwan as a military base to take back mainland China. Faced with protests from the Taiwanese people as a result of the brutality of the KMT ruling, KMT not only wiped out a whole generation of Taiwanese intellectuals (called 228 Massacre) but also implemented the *Temporary Provisions Effective During the Period of National Mobilization for Suppression of the Communist Rebellion* in 1947, followed by the implementation of Martial Law in 1948 to suppress dissent and to justify the military authoritarian rule. From 1947 to 1991, the *Temporary Provisions* replaced the Constitution, and this led to the militarization of the society and the elimination of citizen rights. As Chiang Kai-shek saw his mission in leading revolutionary troops to establish the Republic of China in China, the people were conceptualized as the crowd (qunzhong) who, with proper leadership and good training, could be mobilized to good ends. Within this context, the crowd takes on a different meaning from the West, even though many pioneers in crowd psychology, such as Chang Jeou-ju and Gao Jue-fu, were much influenced by Western crowd psychology, in particular, Gustave le Bon. In Chang’s *Crowd Psychology and Crowd Leadership* and Gao’s *Crowd Psychology*, both first published in 1934, le Bon’s definition and theories on the crowd were taken as an authority. Crowds were defined in terms of their emotionality, lack of rationality, their suggestibility, and their tendency to violence (Gao 1968). Le Bon’s theory was used to serve the state’s aim in controlling the crowd so that they became “organized crowds,” in this case, useful troops. As Rao states clearly: “The only and final goal to study crowd psychology is, on the one hand, to understand the crowd’s mind and behavior, and, on the other, to guide, control, and manipulate their mind and behavior… the final aim is to unify the nation so that democracy, happiness, equality, and prosperity can be achieved” (1977: 43–44).

Le Bon’s notion of the crowd as organized and disorganized is localized as “normal crowd” and “abnormal crowd.” “Normal crowd” refers to passive audiences, who, through suggestibility and indoctrination, can become good revolutionary patriots. “Abnormal crowds” carry all the negative meanings such as violence and emotionality that le Bon associated with women, the working class, and children. But in Taiwan, in media representations, the abnormal crowd referred to those who supported communism despite their class status and gender, even though Rao did take for granted that women and children were more emotional. But within the context of Cold War politics, the language of class was eliminated – the “we” in the nation could only be imagined as classless, obedient soldiers. Hence, media representations of the crowd were split into two categories. On the one hand was an acknowledgment of the passive, obedient crowd as the people of the nation, such as “Prime Minister Chiang urges KMT officials to be part of the crowd” (*China Times*, 28 September 1973) and “Strengthening the crowd base starts with strengthening the Party member base” (*United Daily News*, 14 December 1979). On the other hand, a fear of the emotional and violent communist crowd was constantly generated to justify the need for social control (Xiang 1973).
The third round of the restructuring of the nation-state was triggered by democratization processes in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The history of civil society and citizenship in Taiwan can be traced to this period when Martial Law was lifted in 1987, and the multiform social movements composed of different interest groups came to challenge the authoritarian KMT regime. However, this history also coexisted with the redefinition of the “abnormal crowd” from communists to the oppositional party, mainly, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). The derecognition of Taiwan by the US and the withdrawal of Taiwan from the United Nations undermined the KMT’s political legitimacy and sowed the seeds for democratization. In 1979, the Formosa Event (meiliadao shijian) took place when oppositional groups clustered into Dangwai (outside the KMT) and launched a peaceful protest against the KMT state. But the protesters were brutally beaten by the police and put in jail. News media constructed the peaceful protesters as crowds of people who were violent and emotional, and therefore needed to be jailed and severely punished in order to maintain social order. A decade later, when Martial Law was lifted and Dangwai was transformed into the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), mainstream media associated the DPP with the crowd because of their constant presence in street demonstrations and fist fights in Congress. The crowd was constructed as a violent, emotional, and out-of-control mob that threatened social order and needed to be disciplined by rationality and gentleness. And because DPP supporters were constructed by the media as mostly from the working class and the South (a farming population), the association of DPP with the crowd brought in the notion of class, even though class was not explicitly named, but cloaked in the name of urban/rural and a South/North divide.

While mainstream media, supported by the KMT, defined their opposition as the crowd, the intellectuals and activists in Taiwan who supported social movements redefined the crowd through the notion of citizenship in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The term “civil society” was translated from the West to theorize and strengthen social movements. It was first translated as “people’s society” (minjian shehui) and then “citizen society,” translated initially as shimin shehui, followed by gongmin shehui. The notion of minjian shehui is used to describe the oppositional relationship between the people (social movements) and the state – a relationship largely formed through “the democratization of ethnicity” (zuqin minzuhua) in which the ethnic-dominated majority came to demand political power (Ku 2002; Lee and Wu 2008). Definitions of shimin shehui or gongmin shehui vary according to different scholars’ interpretations of civil society. While Ku (2002) uses shimin shehui and gongmin shehui interchangeably to describe people’s self-organized social movements against the state, Lee and Wu (2008) see shimin shehui as civil organizations that serve the interests of the state, while gongmin shehui is an ideal civil society that Taiwan lacks but needs to achieve. Despite the different views toward the nature of the actually existing social movements in Taiwan, Taiwanese advocates of civil society privilege Habermas’ notion of the public sphere as an ideal to articulate their notion of citizen, in this case, gongmin, and civil society (gongmin shehui) within the third sector, distinguished from the state and the market. This definition of citizen, according to Ku, “after the practices of social movements [504 (4 May) Rally’s ‘Ordinary People’s Walk for Taiwan’ and 518 (18 May) Rally’s ‘Use Your Feet to Love Taiwan’ in 1997], the Western concept of citizen/gongmin has become localized and sounds more natural in our own language” (2002: 177). Gongmin/citizen is characterized by collective organization in the public sphere as well as the principle of rational discussion and active political participation. The focus on rationality and activity, however, excludes women and the working class from citizenship.

The formation of citizenship in Taiwan corresponds to the shift in popular conception of law from maintaining order to justice. According to Yang Yi-rong (2002), the KMT authoritarian regime relies on Confucius’ teachings to articulate a legal system that aims to maintain social hierarchy and authority. The primary concern for the legal system is social order, not justice; hence, in popular conception, justice can only be realized outside the legal system. This emphasis on order gives force to the negative meaning of the crowd in suppressing dissent and democratic reform. But the formation of the civil society or social movements enables a change in popular perception that demands that justice be realized within the legal system. Yang argues that in the context of Taiwan, justice can be defined in general as “fighting against authority and the powerful,” but a Western concept of justice can be mapped onto Taiwan’s actual demands for justice which include procedural justice, distributive justice, and basic citizen rights, such as rights to freedom of speech and association and rights to political participation (2002: 112).

The historical trajectory – the battles between the KMT state’s aim to protect its power in the name of social order and the democratization process that articulates citizenship in the search for justice with the aim of overthrowing the authoritarian KMT regime from the 1980s to the 1990s – explains, on the one hand, why a critique of the state bureaucracy/incompetence and the search for justice are the main concerns of citizenship in popular imagination in Taiwan; and on the other hand, why the notion of the crowd as emotional and violent remains a constant presence.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, with the penetration of neoliberal globalization, especially with the rise of China and its aim to unify Taiwan through economic integration, Taiwan was polarized both politically and economically. First, a geo-political-economic map was formed along the “Green South and Blue North” line. The uneven development between the South (dominated by manufacturing industries and agricultural production) led the South to become Green (pro-independence DPP party) territory and the North (dominated by service industry and technology), Blue (pro-unification KMT) (Lin 2007). Intersecting with this geo-politics is the increasing gap between rich and poor. Many terms that describe this phenomenon have been translated from Japanese. Concepts such as the “M-shape society,” “Low Society” (xiaoliu shehui), and “The Working Poor” (qiongming zuo) were translated during 2006 to 2008, and have since become popular vernacular in Taiwan. These describe the disappearance of the middle class and the emergence of the working poor as the dominant socioeconomic trend. They inevitably invoke class antagonisms and challenge the
myth of a classless society – a myth that was the product of the Cold War politics of nation-building. Neoliberal globalization produced a polarized Taiwan that further shaped the way citizenship and crowd was imagined, and how it intersected with profits. As definitions on citizen and crowd always presume certain forms of audiences (Butsch 2008), the following sections use the 88 flood disaster and the Makiyo event to discuss the permutations/continuations of the crowd/citizenship by focusing on the internet audiences as xiangmin, and explore the naming politics in the context of neoliberal globalization.

The 88 flood disaster

The 88 flood disaster was caused by Typhoon Morakot when it hit South Taiwan in 2009. On 9 August, a typhoon-spawned mudslide engulfed Xiaolin village, located in the mountain area of Kaohsiung, where the residents were mainly aborigines, and up to 600 people were buried. According to official death tolls, the typhoon caused 681 deaths, with 18 missing. Owing to a slow response and poor rescue attempts, President Ma Ying-jeou was severely criticized, and his popularity dropped significantly, leading to a Cabinet reshuffle. He was also criticized for his arrogance. Instead of taking responsibility, he blamed local government, which was under DPP control, for failing to evacuate the villagers. This channeling of ineffectiveness into political antagonism led many victims to regard him as uncompassionate, distant, and arrogant. Many news reports likened Typhoon Morakot to “Hurricane Katrina” for President Ma.

In contrast, via the internet, xiangmin contributed by helping the victims in ways that immediately integrated all sorts of resources and manpower. As a result of the disaster, “internet friends” (wangyou), and also the victims themselves, used social media such as Twitter, Plurk, and blogs to transmit information, and afterwards, formed a public forum that served as a counterbalance to the established political structure.

In numerous media coverage and commentaries, internet audiences are constructed as citizens. In describing internet audiences as citizens, a binary construction of a value hierarchy is set up – new vs. traditional, mainstream vs. alternative, active participation vs. passive reception – and internet users are constructed as the good, active, new citizens fighting against the old, rotten, existing political establishments. Two kinds of citizenship discourses are used to describe internet users. The first focuses on internet users as active political participants engaging in new forms of political actions, distinguished from traditional political establishments that polarized party antagonisms to mask their own problems. For example, in talking about how internet users effectively generated humanitarian aid for the disaster victims, they were described as active, new citizens, central to the formation of a new Taiwan – beyond political polarization: “we observe how xiangmin’s space is transformed into citizen society and how internet users do not divide themselves along the traditional blue and green political camps, but transcend these divisions – all for a safe Taiwan” (Kao 2009). 

In addition, the image of the active xiangmin as citizens is constructed against incompetent government bureaucracy. When facing the sudden crisis brought about by the flood the government was described as “a broken system.” Both central and local governments were seen as losing control of the situation, and unable to alleviate people’s collective anxiety. In contrast, the so-called “netizens” were regarded as more advanced than the government in terms of their digital comprehension and abilities. Some xiangmin directly participated in the Disaster Emergency Operation Center for central government in establishing an information system. Moreover, in PTT, the largest bulletin board system in Taiwan, a community called the “Disaster Relief Group of Xiangmin” was formed to make up for missing resources in the rescue system, including soliciting manpower, vehicles, relief supplies, and handicrafts needed for rescue attempts. The extraordinary performances of the “digital citizens” or the “internet army” made up an “awe-inspiring power” (“88 flood: touching dedication of digital citizens”, 2009).

The second discourse on internet audiences as citizens is articulated through the image of ordinary people as “citizen journalists” able to transcend the dominant television media and become the only objective and rational voice in the public sphere. In this discourse, television media is constructed as corrupted by commercialism as well as political biases (due to political polarization in Taiwan). Television journalists are constructed as plagiarizers who only “copy and paste” from the internet to make news, while television audiences are constructed as “collective dupes” who are “paralyzed and deadened by TV” (Lin 2005). In contrast to the “mainstream” television audience dupes, internet users are “citizen journalists” and provide alternative “rational voices” to the public (ibid.).

In the 88 flood disaster, many aboriginal tribes were devastated, and transport systems between the city and the mountain were disrupted. Reporters dispatched from traditional media were unable to effectively cover all of the disaster areas; however, the internet enabled many victims themselves to operate as “reporters” by sending images of the suffering online. As the United Daily News editorial (25 August 2009) said, “No wonder the netizens exclaim: ‘It is fortunate to live in the era of Web 2.0.’ Those who can’t go back home can check the information collected by the netizens, and then confirm whether the flood recedes in the neighborhood or not.”

In addition to the two citizen discourses, the third discourse defines internet users as markets/consumers for businesses. This discourse is framed within the terms...
of technocratic capitalism, and is thus spoken from the business view. The growing number of internet users is regarded as a potentially lucrative market that even conventional businesses cannot ignore. In market thinking, social relations in the virtual community can be transformed into economic ones for profit making. Here are some examples: “Online communities are the new sweethearts of corporate marketing” (Chiang 2009: 112), “How to expand and turn flows of visitors on the website into flows of money” (Li 1999: 88), and “Internet company as a big magnet for sucking money” (Kang 1999: 115).

Xiangmin’s power of mobilization in the flood disaster was abruptly transformed into market potential by the mainstream media. The virtual community of the xiangmin was described as powerful not only in the disaster rescue, but also in commercial activities such as online shopping, bargaining, and new product testing. As the cover story of Common Wealth (26 August 2009) said, “social media exert the zero-to-hero influences to the fullest during the 88 flood disaster. The advent of micro-blogging has made up for the marketing gaps of websites (over massification) and MSN (over privatization, instant one-to-one communication).”

In the coverage of the 88 flood disaster, the image of internet users was constructed as active netizens by the dominant media. Using their technological expertise, xiangmin formed the “Disaster Relief Group of Xiangmin” (鄉民救災團) and the “internet army” (網路大軍). They were regarded as more powerful in rescuing the disaster victims than the government bureaucracy and the old media organizations. They were also seen as citizens of the new Taiwan that transcended the old media that was part of the problem of political polarization. The citizenship discourse emphasizes active participation, newness, rationality, and efficiency. However, this citizenship was realized through individual action, that is, online voluntary charity and rescue activities. These citizenship/netizenship values – newness, rationality, effectiveness, active participation, and individualism – correspond to those promoted by techno-capitalism, and are thus easily transferred to a potential market within the terms of capitalism for profit making.

The Makio event

The variety talk show entertainer, Makio, got drunk with her friends and beat up a taxi driver to near death in early 2012. When this attack was leaked into the media, she accused the taxi driver of sexual harassment. But when ordinary “citizen journalists” sent surveillance camera footage to the media to expose her lie, the whole nation went wild. The intensity of media coverage, as well as the “heat” and “anger” aroused by the media, constituted a rare event in television history that has stimulated further discussion on the role of the media and audiences. This section analyzes the three discourses that regulate how we talk about internet audiences in this cross-media event. The first discourse takes the internet audience as ordinary people embodying justice and who see themselves as a “jury of peers” or arbiters of justice. The celebrity Chu Hsue-heng is used to illustrate this concept. Chu’s knowledge of Japanese ACG (Animation-Comic-Game) has earned him the title “the God of otaku” (宅屌, home boy) and hence, he is representative of the young new media generation. In a YouTube video that originally featured in the political talk show, TVBS 2100, titled “Chu Hsue-heng represents little people and ordinary citizens’ voice.” Chu emphasizes, on the one side, that “it is the powerful entertainers who have access to the media … [and who] can behave like gangsters”; and on the other, “it is the poor taxi driver who has to stay up at night and earn a living to support his family.” “The taxi driver and his wife have no access to the media, if we don’t speak for him, who will speak for him?” Many xiangmin identified with Chu’s point, and an anti-Makio fan group was formed immediately, with over 160,000 internet users pressing “zan” (“like”) in a few days. In this particular event, class antagonisms were emphasized through the construction of a polarized Taiwanese society structured by the people (poor and ordinary citizens) and the power bloc (the rich and famous). Xiangmin are identified with the people, the citizens actively seeking justice and truth, and who speak for the poor and the disadvantaged.

However, such self-appointed responsibility by xiangmin is complicated by a profit motive. In Chu’s famous blog that earned him the title of “The God of otaku,” a receipt proving his donation to the taxi driver was enlarged and positioned at the center of the blog page. On the left-hand side, however, was an advertisement for selling t-shirts for the “Otaku Insurgent Army” (宅宅反抗軍). “This is our responsibility for the blood- and tear-stricken victims and their survivors” (Chu 2012). If xiangmin’s self-identified role is as seekers of justice and truth, the way to proceed, however, was to buy t-shirts to become part of an “army” and to donate money to the victims.

The second discourse, however, turns xiangmin into a crowd. Jeou-ba-dao, a famous writer and director in Taiwan, represents such a position. The discourse can be traced to the popular film trailer, Xiangmin’s Justice in 2010 (with its final release in 2012), based on the true story of BBS/PTT culture in Taiwan. Xiangmin’s Justice was constructed as mass witch-hunt that unjustly sacrificed people’s lives. News media called this form of justice, “the violence of the crowd” (Tian 2010). Faced with overwhelming anger directed at Makio, and the pressure for celebrities to take a moral stand against Makio, Jeou-ba-dao used Xiangmin’s Justice to accuse the anti-Makio fan group of “wrecking” those celebrities who did not come forward and “f**k” Makio (“Makio is ruined …”, 2012).

Here, xiangmin is constructed as a crowd, and Xiangmin’s Justice as “following the crowd”: “from one to two to three to a crowd, not many people know what they are doing” (“Makio is ruined …”, 2012). The notion of the crowd evokes fear of irrationality that is easily turned into violence. The United Daily News published an Editorial: “Riding on the collective hatred … a crowd of on-lookers collectively enjoy the pleasure of denouncing the targeting other.” “This form of justice is cruelty which hides behind the crowd” (Liang 2012: A19). Moreover, “The internet’s mobilizing power creates a super bullying machine in the name of justice to speak for the victim … This is a society composed of unthinking mass/collectivity (集體不思考的社會) which always appeals to emotion” (“When the police
become the crowd,” 2012). Similarly, Liberty Times’ Opinion Page published many articles on xiangmin’s violence: “The media hold public trial, xiangmin act on group fucking. This is a form of public rape” (Hu 2012). In this discourse, the image of xiangmin’s violence was reinforced: bully, rape, gang rape, wreck, and target. These verbs described xiangmin’s violence but ironically, such actions of violence were the result of their passivity, lack of rationality, individuality, and critical thinking.

The linking of violence to passivity is validated through a particular form of internet engagement – pressing keys on the keyboard. Jeou-ba-dao states: “justice should not be just about pressing ‘zan’ [like] on anti-Makiyo fans Facebook, justice should be about caring for the weak and devoting your time, money, and labor ... real justice should be about actual action” (“Makiyo is ruined ...”, 2012). Similarly, the United Daily News editorial claimed: “as opposed to a citizen society, this is a xiangmin society ... The justice expressed through pressing ‘zan’/like offers a sense of belonging and justice but it is the cheapest form of justice” (“Arranging a defense lawyer ...”, 2012).

A set of binaries structures this discourse: crowd vs. citizens, passivity vs. activity, irrationality/emotion vs. rationality, fake/cheap justice vs. real justice, and virtual world vs. real world. The invocation of the crowd as emotional, passive, and violent as opposed to the imagined rational public/citizen is historically used by the dominant to silence opposition to the existing political establishment in the name of maintaining social order in Taiwan. This negative view of the crowd constitutes the positivity of the citizen. However, citizen values are channelled into individualistic undertaking such as voluntarism in the name of “actual action.” Rather than passively staying in the virtual world, internet audiences should take action to donate money to the poor, as Jeou-ba-dao did himself to the taxi driver.

The third discourse assumes the audience to be passive but directs attention to the media in using the Makiyo event in creating a moral panic. Celebrities such as Jeou-ba-dao and Chu Hsue-heng were seen as “moral entrepreneurs” who actively advocated their own forms of morality through the creation of a moral panic (Becker 1997), but such moral panics are created by the media for social control through diverting attention away from real political affairs (Hall 1978). This view of moral panics as social control is echoed in many Taiwanese critics’ commentaries in newspaper opinion pages and blogs. In this discourse, the media’s witch-hunt or public trial of Makiyo was seen as evidence of the media’s search for ratings rather than justice (Yi 2012), diverting attention away from more urgent political affairs such as the forced importation of beef with Ractopamine by the US and the KMT government (Tu 2012): “Real justice should be directed toward people with more power than Makiyo,” such as President Ma Ying-jeou (Huang 2012). In directing attention to the media as a form of manipulation, audiences of both new and old media were constructed as “Ah-Q,” a literary figure who misdirected his anger toward the wrong person, but not the structure that created the anger (Jun 52328 2012). Implicit in this critique is the notion of the audience as passive and easily manipulated. The opposite of the audience are citizen-critics.

In these three discourses on the Makiyo event, the meanings of xiangmin are defined within a binary framework of activity vs. passivity. Activity is associated with male citizen, and passivity is associated with the crowd who are constructed as emotional and irrational – traits that have been historically associated with femininity. The first discourse, articulated by xiangmin themselves, emphasizes the active and resistant nature of citizenry in seeking justice and truth for the poor. But citizens are conceptualized in masculine terms through the metaphor of “army,” a male domain of citizen obligation that also grants men privileges in other domains. The second discourse invokes the image of the crowd to condemn and silence class antagonisms elicited in the first discourse. It establishes class differences by first emphasizing working-class hypermasculinity as opposed to middle-class disembodied sobriety. Working-class physicality is demarcated through the language of violence and gang rape that then gets transformed into femininity and passivity by naming it as emotion and irrationality. The third discourse, though directing attention to the media in creating moral panics to achieve social control, constructed internet audiences as passive as opposed to the enlightened (active and male) critic/citizen. The concepts that define xiangmin as crowd or citizen are very similar to that of the West in the late nineteenth century. This is because historically, the concept of the crowd as emotional, passive, and violent is translated from the West, in particular, le Bon’s theory of the crowd. In the context of Taiwan, the notion of the abnormal/violent crowd is re-articulated in each historical moment of nation-state restructuring, from the communists to the oppositional party. However, what is constant is that this notion of the crowd is always invoked by the existing power elite to police protests and anger in maintaining the status quo. If in the Chiang regime case it is a taboo, the DPP as the crowd in the transition to democracy already implies class sense, though it is cloaked in the geo-political language of the North vs. the South and the city vs. the country. In the current historical moment of neoliberalization, with the increasing gap between rich and poor, class antagonisms (with its languages translated from Japanese to understand local reality) form the basis for the collective response toward the Makiyo event. However, this collective response of anger is policed by invoking the historically sedimented image of the crowd as emotional, passive, and violent. This act of policing establishes the citizen as the opposite of the crowd, and works to maintain the cultural legitimacy of the middle-class male citizen while simultaneously derogating the working class (and women) by feminizing them as the crowd.

In addition to gender and class politics which underlie the definition of citizens as individuals as opposed to crowds, the concept of individualism also brings into being a new subject: the citizen-consumer. Both the first and second discourses, despite their opposite views on xiangmin, offer the actual charitable action of donating money to the poor or buying t-shirts as a solution. That is, active citizenship, in seeking justice, is reduced to an individual action of consumption or voluntary charity. This active citizenship marks the neoliberal form of citizenship promoted by the neoliberal state.
Conclusion

The internet has played a significant part in forming citizenship in Taiwan, especially since the late 1990s when the term “citizen” (gōng mín) became localized. As a technology that offers potential for social mobilization but that is dominated by multinational corporations, it plays a critical role in the twin processes of democratization and neoliberalization. Shaw (2000) points out that internet studies in Taiwan are divided into two camps, following the dichotomous trajectories of a political economic and cultural studies approach in the West. For Taiwanese political economists, concentration of internet ownership has created fears of passive audiences manipulated by commercial interests and a commercialized/privatized public sphere serving the interests of the corporations rather than the people (Cheng 1999; Feng 1998). On the other hand, a cultural studies approach (audience studies) looks at internet audiences’ agency in creating “fragmented but solid alliances” that facilitate the formation and empowerment of social movements such as women’s groups (Fang and Su 1998). The utopian and dystopian views of the internet that emerged from the context of democratization and neoliberalization characterize popular imagination about the internet that sees internet users as active citizens on the one hand, and as passive consumers on the other.

However, in popular discourses, the dichotomy between activity and passivity remains significant in articulating citizenship, but the citizen-consumer binary no longer stands as these are articulated by multinational corporations to exploit the “active” nature of the internet and to channel citizenship into consumption. Despite the very different nature of the two media events discussed here – one a collectively experienced natural disaster that positively defines what citizenship is, and the other based on moral panics that define citizenship through the negative image of the crowd – the language of active citizenship is central to understanding how the meanings of internet audiences as xiangmin are imagined and struggled over. It remains the unquestioned privileged signifier in contemporary political struggles. This active citizenship, moreover, establishes the legitimacy of a citizen-consumer.

The politics of active citizenship must be understood within the context of state-promoted neoliberal globalization in which the state plays a major role in redefining the notion of citizenship. Immediately after President Ma was elected in 2008, a series of commercials promoting a Reagan-style trickle-down economy were aired on television to inform the audience of the benefits of tax cuts for the rich in creating jobs. Cutting taxes for the rich became the Ma government’s guideline for economic reform, in addition to creating a friendly environment for multinational corporations to cross the border between China and Taiwan. The result has been catastrophic – the unemployment rate as well as the gap between rich and poor has reached historic heights, and actual salaries have declined and regressed back to 14 years ago. Young people have been particularly hard hit. Ma’s re-election in 2012 marks another stage of neoliberal reform – the cutting back of social welfare, eulogized as “the necessary route to modernity” (Chuan 2012). With this reform, the notion of justice and citizenship previously articulated for democracy and social welfare has been re-articulated to fit a neoliberal policy. In an interview on reform policies, President Ma defined citizens as taxpayers and consumers/users, and called the market principle the yardstick of justice. Social welfare was considered unjust because it was “taking poor taxpayers’ money to support the rich and it is a form of injustice” (Chuan 2012: A05). Moreover, citizens were users/consumers who had to pay for what they used, according to the market principle.

Citizen rights, in Marshall’s formulation (Walby 1994), include civil rights (rights to freedom of speech and association), political rights (rights to vote or to be voted as representatives), and social rights (rights to welfare), and these were the primary concerns in Taiwan’s democratization in the late 1980s and 1990s. But in the new context, justice has been transformed by the government by channeling people’s antagonism toward the rich to further cut back citizens’ social rights, making individual pain caused by neoliberal restructuring a natural and necessary process of “growing into adulthood” (Chuan 2012). In this rhetoric of “growing-up pain,” collective suffering is individualized into personal matter, and all three forms of citizen rights are reduced to individualized consumer rights, predicated on choice.

In both the events, internet audiences tried to define themselves as active citizens/gōng mín, which has its root in Taiwan’s context of the democratization process. However, the meaning of active citizenship articulated in these two media events fits well with the current neoliberal regime that, paradoxically, is undermining democratic citizenship. What characterizes popular imagination about active citizenship is voluntarism, with individual action constructed as the foundation of citizenship. In the 88 flood disaster, the internet audiences called themselves citizens by forming a “Villagers’ Disaster Relief Group” (漁村救援團). In the Makyio event, active citizens were defined through taking action such as donating money. The voluntarism involved emphasizes obligation to the nation-state rather than citizen rights, and this is why the metaphor of an “army” was invoked in both events – despite (or maybe precisely because of) their dissatisfaction with the state bureaucracy, the “army” had to come forward to strengthen the neoliberal state.

This active citizenship, similar to that which was invoked in Britain in the 1980s and 1990s when neoliberalism took root, is a form of depoliticized citizenship. The conservative British Right has seized the language of active citizenship and turned social welfare rights into that of “an economic kind” (market access-related) as well as civil responsibility to the community (Evans 1993; Oliver 1991; Yuval-Davis 1997). The active citizen fulfills his or her citizenship duties by donating spare money and time to the community. In this discourse, “citizenship stops being a political discourse and becomes a voluntary involvement within civil society, in which the social rights of the poor are transferred, at least partly, from entitlements into charities … Obligations are shifted from the public sphere of tax-financed benefits and services to the private sphere of charity and voluntary service” (Yuval-Davis 1997: 16–17). Citizenship becomes gifts, rather than rights. This civil responsibility, however, is predicated on the economic rights of the citizen to “promote the individual persona and private autonomy of the individual” rather than the
relationship between the individual and the state (Evans 1993: 4). It is, in a word, consumer rights.

The form of citizenship articulated in the 88 flood disaster and the Makiyo event can be characterized as a kind of voluntarism that reduced citizenship to an economic kind to enhance personal autonomy. This citizenship reproduces the one articulated by the current state rather than the social movements of the 1980s and 1990s. While the state defines justice as forfeiting social welfare and individuals as consumers, xiǎngmìng define their active citizenship as voluntarism predicates on an economic kind of consumer rights. It is no wonder that the citizen action in the 88 flood disaster was immediately seized as a market, a consumer category by the multinational corporations and, in the Makiyo event, citizenship was turned into the act of buying t-shirts. This depoliticized form of active citizenship, paradoxically, emerged as a remedy or a desire to transcend the polarization of Taiwan’s society as a result of neoliberal restructuring, be it political, economic, social, or geographic. The inequality that motivates citizens’ search for justice, however, is co-opted by the market-centered state by turning it into individualized, consumeristic action that further strengthens neoliberal reform and undermines civil, social, and political citizenship.

However, passive citizenship, defined through the rhetoric of the crowd, highlights women and working-class people’s “differential access to citizenship” (Walby 1994). If media scholars’ main concern is about how multinational corporations are producing passive audiences and undermining citizenship, in the two cases analyzed here, it was active citizenship that was co-opted as consumerism. The consumer-citizen marks the dominant/normal position in contemporary Taiwan. The notion of passive citizenship as a crowd, however, is used by the elite to define “the other” in order to legitimize different groups’ differential access to citizenship. As demonstrated, active citizenship relies on rationality, individual autonomy, and individual choice for legitimacy, while passive citizenship uses the language of passivity, emotion, irrationality, and crowd violence, terms that have historically been associated with the communists, the oppositional party, women, and now, the lower class. While women are the invisible “other” and gender politics, the foundation of this masculine citizenship talk, the working class, or the poor are constructed as takers of charity as opposed to giving citizens. The notion of passive citizens as a crowd marks existing social divisions. They are part of the discursive war to legitimize the active citizen—consumer and to exclude women and the working class from citizenry (defined in terms of citizen rights). In these two discursive wars on xiǎngmìng as citizens or non-citizens, the neoliberal notion of citizenship is further entrenched in popular imagination.

Notes
1 The KMT party believed they were the true representatives of ROC and Communist China stole the land. China calls itself the People’s Republic of China, while Taiwan is called The Republic of China – initially recognized by the UN, but later de-recognized by the UN. As a result, Taiwan became a “state without nation,” or a “challenged

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