

# Unthinking Digital Fascism: China's Youth Crisis and Political Reaction

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**Abstract:** This article examines the rise of digital fascism in China amid the youth crisis, economic instability, and tensions between the state and capital within global infrastructural capitalism. Digital fascism is understood as a decentralised, digital form of fascist ideology that appropriates nationalist and pseudo-leftist sentiments and discourses to undermine social movements. We argue that this ideology's rise is deeply rooted in the collapse of socialist revolutionary ideals and the collective political identity in post-Maoist China. In the absence of a political horizon, some young people are drawn to a distorted form of nationalism, which is a prerequisite for digital fascism. We assert that digital fascism is not a relic of the past but an ideological effect, manifesting as affects, aesthetics, and sentiments embodied in social media and nationalist discourse. By merging resentment, symbolic purity, and moral judgment, digital fascism creates a reactive political subjectivity that engages in symbolic violence rather than strategic political action.

**Keywords:** digital fascism, youth crisis, political reaction, digital nationalism

## 1. Introduction

Entering this challenging historical moment, we are shocked by the surge of digital fascism in China, at the confluence of global capitalism and conflicts between the USA and China. Digital fascism is understood as a cultural logic of infrastructure, a decentralised form of fascist ideology that operates within China's online spaces, using nationalist and pseudo-leftist rhetoric to undermine progressive movements and class-based political discourse.

History oscillates between tragedy and farce, with its clock mocking post/modernity and late capitalism. While the pendulum swings from revolution to fascism, some left-wing colleagues in China suggest fascism has yet to emerge, arguing we are currently in an age of Bonapartism. Although this perspective may seem valid when observing political figures, the true drivers of tragedy and farce in today's politics lie at the grass-roots level – civil society actively contributes to the creation and perpetuation of digital fascism. This issue is vital because it underscores the youth crisis, reactive digital politics, and the growing influence of populist ideologies.

The left's discourse in China paradoxically mirrors Western liberal narratives. Since the fall of classical fascist regimes in the mid-20th century, liberal narratives have anticipated the end of fascism, treating it as a historical anomaly or pathology of a bygone era. Yet reality has grown more complex. The rise of fascism often signals a failed revolution – global capitalism has prevailed. The Cold War context has shifted since 1989; it is no longer a bipolar ideological confrontation but a global capitalist conflict between two political blocs. The failure of socialist revolutions has inadvertently paved the way for the resurgence of counter-revolutionary politics. Fascism today is not merely a relic but a recurring possibility rooted in the contradictions of deepening global

infrastructural capitalism. Its threat lies in its invisibility – actual fascists rarely identify themselves as such in the postwar era. This concealment renders contemporary fascists more elusive and insidious.

Compared with traditional fascism, which openly paraded symbols, paramilitary aesthetics, and authoritarian ambitions, modern variants often disguise themselves as progress, populism, or even revolution. They do not announce themselves; they submerge and then, often emotionally and discursively yet violently, emerge from below. For us, the pressing question is not whether fascism exists, but in what form it returns – and how we will see it.

As early as World War II, Franz L. Neumann's *Behemoth* (1944) described Nazi Germany as a “non-state” rather than merely a totalitarian system, in which diverse power groups (military, capital, party) collaborated under the unified ideology of the Volk and the Führer. Friedrich Pollock (1941) recognised “state capitalism” as a new form of authoritarian political economy that maintains private property while centralising both economic and political authority, thereby blurring the boundary between the state and capital. These insights emphasise the structural conditions – such as economic crises, institutional failures, and ideological breakdowns – that render fascism a persistent threat rather than a historical anomaly.

Henryk Grossmann's (1992) theory of capitalist breakdown further deepens this understanding. According to Grossmann, fascism was never a spontaneous eruption of mass irrationality but rather a counterrevolutionary response to capitalism's internal contradictions, aimed at safeguarding capital accumulation by suppressing working-class agency. Far from opposing capitalism, fascism functioned as a pragmatic political strategy for capitalism's self-preservation amid systemic decline. As a result, fascism was a reactionary response to the capitalist crisis, mediated through mass politics by exploiting nationalist sentiments and racist, hateful ideologies. It appropriated anti-communism, an aesthetic of pseudo-unity, and a mythologised notion of national rebirth to divert working-class discontent from class antagonism toward symbolic enemies – specifically Jews, foreigners, liberals, and communists. The current digital social landscape – characterised by algorithmic fragmentation, post-truth politics, and emotional saturation – creates fertile ground for what may be termed digital fascism to emerge.

Digital fascism does not mirror its twentieth-century predecessors in form but in function. It arises not from charismatic mass parties or imperial conquest but from disillusioned individuals, online subcultures, and digital populism. It circulates through memes, livestreams, pseudo-theory, and moralised rage rather than manifestos and marches. Yet its affective structure remains constant: resentment, symbolic purification, anti-intellectualism, and violent nostalgia. Critically, digital fascism is not a top-down project of state elites – it emerges from civil society itself. Like classical fascism, it often begins with what appears to be revolutionary energy: anti-corruption, anti-elitism, and appeals to justice. But without emancipatory vision, collective organisation, or structural analysis, this energy collapses into moral authoritarianism, aestheticised violence, and a desire for symbolic revenge: a word, political reaction.

Fuchs (2018, 2022, 2026) conceptualises digital fascism not as a historical anomaly or a mere side-effect of technological progress, but as an ideological manifestation rooted deeply in the systemic contradictions of capitalism. According to Fuchs (2026), digital fascism functions through a recursive “tripleC”-dynamic: fascist practices (cognition, communication, and co-production) and digital structures (commercial platforms, algorithms, and datafication) constantly reinforce one another.

Digital platforms enable the convergence of information consumption and production (prosumption). Users do not merely consume fascist propaganda; they actively co-produce and distribute it (Fuchs 2021).

Fuchs (2022) notes that the business models of major social media corporations (such as Meta and X) rely on the “attention economy” and data surveillance. Because negative emotions like anger, fear, and hatred drive the highest user engagement, platform algorithms naturally boost sensationalist, conspiratorial, and nationalist content. Thus, capital accumulation is structurally aligned with the spread of fascist ideologies.

However, while Fuchs's research primarily focuses on the composition and contradictions of capital, we build on his work by turning our attention to the mechanisms of subject formation during this moment of capitalist crisis, a phenomenon we term digital fascism.

We see a rising wave of digital fascism not only in China but worldwide. In various regions, educated youth, disaffected petty bourgeois segments, and downwardly mobile workers channel their frustration through nationalist, masculinist, or pseudo-leftist rhetoric. The condition of economic precarity and ideological exhaustion – compounded by political foreclosure – produces a subject prone to mythic identification rather than strategic politicisation. Digital fascism interpellates this subject.

In the Chinese digital space, digital fascism as an ideological state apparatus is no longer speculative. It has already materialised in loosely organised yet ideologically intact communities centred on leading figures. A notable example is Future (pseudonym), an unbelievably popular figure known for his early “immersion” in leftist thought. As a young student, he was exposed to Marxist theories and claimed deep influence from classical Marxists, including Karl Marx and Lenin. However, upon encountering various schools of post-structuralism, including the work of Slavoj Žižek and Jacques Derrida, he critically reassessed his Marxist foundations. Future's most controversial shift came when he aligned himself with forces many viewed as counter-revolutionary. His critiques of leftist activists and revolutionaries, whom he derided as “radicals,” marked a sharp departure from his earlier beliefs. Future's transition from a “socialist” to a more reactionary figure can be understood as self-preservation driven by the pressures of contemporary Chinese politics.

Future's actions and ideological trajectory exemplify the core traits of digital fascism, blending opportunism with a reactionary defence of the Chinese state while hollowing out leftist radicalism. His ideological pragmatism is not merely about critiquing the left – it extends to actively infiltrating left-wing organisations and mobilising his followers to report them to the state. In doing so, he mirrors fascist tactics of ideological subversion, using manipulation and division to destroy opposition from within. Rather than being a mere critic, Future becomes a tool of the state, turning leftist movements into self-destructive factions by sowing distrust and feeding information to the authorities. This strategy of betrayal, coupled with his defence of the existing system, positions Future as a quintessential figure in the propagation of digital fascism, in which control is exercised not only through censorship but also through a network of subversion, infiltration, and manipulation aimed at neutralising any challenge to the status quo. His actions reveal the dangerous fusion of authoritarianism and digital media, where fascism is no longer a political movement but a tool for undermining and destroying ideological opponents from within.

Regrettably, individuals like Future exemplify a new form of reactive subjectivity emerging in China: not simply state agents but grassroots enforcers of the ideological state apparatus who actively monitor, accuse, and report on leftist content on platforms

such as Bilibili, Weibo, and Zhihu. Their repressive acts often occur without direct orders from official institutions, fuelled instead by loyalty, a desire for symbolic purity, and a moral stance. On forums and comments, such individuals regularly use nationalist and pseudo-Marxist language to attack labour movements, anti-capitalist critiques, and class-based mobilisation – labelling them as “foreign infiltration,” “colour revolution,” or “ultra-leftism”. These digital vigilantes act as self-appointed ideologues, driven by emotional ties to a mythologised state, a moralised view of order, and an aesthetic of national purity. In this way, Chinese digital fascists are not just passive recipients of state ideology but active participants in authoritarian governmentality, narrowing the scope for political expression from below. Their actions embody what Étienne Balibar (1994) called the “ultra-politics” of reactionary mass mobilisation – a form of political engagement that replaces debate with denunciation and solidarity with symbolic purging. Therefore, digital fascism in China is not just a potential threat; it is a real, affective-political system already in place, grounded in the demise of revolutionary ideals and the dominance of nationalist discourse.

It is not enough for the left to dismiss such formations as aberrant, irrational, or simply reactionary. Fascism has always presented itself as “revolutionary”, seeking to break from the old order and create a radically new political and social structure. This self-image was reinforced through ideological narratives of national rebirth and the rejection of liberal democracy and Marxism. In Germany and Italy, it co-opted the language of national rejuvenation, social justice, and even workers' rights – before turning violently against the left (Paxton 2004; Sternhell et al. 1994). If we fail to understand digital fascism in its complexity – its socio-economic roots, its symbolic operations, and its emotional appeal – we risk repeating the very errors that allowed fascism to triumph.

More dangerously, if no credible alternative is built and youth remain symbolically orphaned and organisationally atomised, fascism will not be defeated – it will be re-branded. Its aesthetic may shift, and its slogans adapt, but its function – to arrest political transformation through moralised unity and symbolic violence – will persist. In this sense, digital fascism is not a spectre of the past but a symptom of the present. It is the unresolved contradiction of a world in which capitalism has exhausted its “emancipatory” promises and no collective horizon has emerged. It is a warning and a call: not merely to condemn, but to theorise, organise, and intervene – before myth becomes history once again.

In short, we discuss the rise of digital fascism in China in the context of the youth crisis, economic instability, and tensions between the state and capital within global infrastructural capitalism. Without a political horizon after the loss of the socialist vision, some young people are drawn to a distorted form of nationalism, a prerequisite for digital fascism. By merging resentment, symbolic purity, and moral judgment, digital fascism creates a reactive political subjectivity that engages in symbolic violence rather than strategic political action. In the following sections, we first discuss the psychic crisis of youth in post-reform China, then turn to how digital fascism operates in contemporary China, its mechanisms, and its driving forces. We finally touch upon the formation of the subject of digital fascism. The subject's journey is, in fact, a reactive dialogue with the nationalist discourse machine. We call for political commoning as a way of de-fascisation that deserves further exploration. It is not simply a refusal of fascist affect but a material and symbolic reorganisation of commoning life in opposition to fascist closure.

## 2. The Psychic Crisis of Youth in Post-Reform China

### *“On My Deathbed”*

I want to take another look at the ocean, behold the vastness of tears from half a lifetime

I want to climb another mountain, try to call back the soul that I’ve lost

I want to touch the sky, feel that blueness so light

But I can’t do any of this, so I’m leaving this world

Everyone who’s heard of me

Shouldn’t be surprised at my leaving

Even less should you sigh or grieve

I was fine when I came, and fine when I left.

– Xu Lizhi, 30 September 2014

Xu Lizhi, a Foxconn worker and a poet, took his own life at the age of 24 in Shenzhen, China, after writing the above poem. As a young worker, Xu aspired to work in a bookstore, but he was rejected because of his education and employment status. This poem, “On My Deathbed,” signifies the death of a revolutionary China, the emptiness of the utopian vision, and the loss of collective political identity as a worker. No longer a protagonist of the socialist country, Xu wrote numerous poems to “call back the soul that I’ve lost”, condemning the capitalist world as it created not only alienation and exploitation, but also class injuries and psychic crises for the youth whose meaning of life was questioned. Submerged in the capitalist ocean, Xu could no longer see the blue sky with lightness, and leaving this world was the final statement. The death of the class subjects.

The dissolution of collective political identity in post-socialist China constitutes a profound ideological disorientation that shapes the psychic condition of today’s young students and workers. The Maoist era of mass mobilisation and revolutionary calling is gone, and so is class-based politics. Under this ideological void, the discourse of class struggle was recoded into technocratic visions of modernity and national rejuvenation, severing political agency from collective struggle. As Lin Chun (2013) noted, the post-socialist condition is defined by the disarticulation between the state and ideology. The revolutionary subject, once summoned through class struggle, was reconstituted as a self-maximising entrepreneurial individual navigating a depoliticised social field. This shift entailed not only the retreat of the socialist vision but also the domestication of Marxism into a language of national strength and economic growth – a process that simultaneously hollowed out its revolutionary core and elevated the state as the ultimate bearer of historical legitimacy (Rebecca 2020).

However, this ideological shift did not yield coherence. Instead, it has produced contradictory ideological formations in which residual elements of class politics persist as phantasmatic disturbances within the developmentalist order. Developmentalism, therefore, is not a seamless narrative but a hegemonic compromise formation, perpetually haunted by the spectre of class struggle it attempts to repress. Simultaneously, the state’s effort to re-legitimise itself through a nationalised and patriotic Marxism – one that subordinates revolutionary politics to sovereign security – has generated a further contradiction. The emancipatory promise of Marxism is subsumed under the logic of state preservation, creating a conceptual tension between revolution and order. In this configuration, nationalism re-emerges not simply as ideology but as a symbolic adhesive that binds these antagonistic discourses. It performs a mediating function: offering affective unity where conceptual coherence is lacking.

We argue that the recurring Chinese nationalism operates precisely in this way – not as a consistent doctrine but as a reactive affective formation that neutralises the contradictions among capitalist development, authoritarian governance, and fragmented socialist memory. Nationalism thus becomes the ideological form of last resort: it masks the instability of the developmentalist-Marxist hybrid and sutures the fractured political imaginary of the youth subject.

For young people growing up in this ideological milieu, political identity is experienced as a series of symbolic contradictions: they are interpellated as loyal citizens, competitive neoliberal individuals, and morally pure patriots – all without a stable collective referent. The result is a condition of *existential dispersal*, marked by the absence of a coherent ideological community. What remains is a symbolic void saturated with mixed political affects – longing, resentment, betrayal – which provide fertile ground for mythologised political substitutes, including the aesthetic and moral configurations of digital fascism.

This shift not only makes nationalism part of China's current mainstream discourse but also gives it strong symbolic translatability. Nowadays, almost everything can be interpreted through the framework of nationalism, whether it is domestic social issues or international political conflicts. At this moment, with increasing economic pressures, the excessive proliferation of nationalist discourse has led to the emergence of digital fascism, which, paradoxically, is also a result of the nationalist discourse machine's failure.

### 3. Digital Fascism

It was only one step further that online nationalism mutated into digital fascism. Before we dig into the mechanisms of how digital fascism functions within the youth crisis, let us first outline its features and distinctive forces. Digital fascism is not merely the digitisation of classical fascist aesthetics or motifs; it constitutes a novel ideological formation emerging within the politically networked condition of late capitalism. It is marked by fragmented semiotic regimes, affective mobilisation, and symbolic myth-making replacing coherent ideological programs or organised institutional apparatuses. Unlike classical fascism, which relied on centralised authority, state-led violence, and mythic unity under charismatic leadership, digital fascism operates in decentralised digital infrastructure – platforms that reward virality over coherence, outrage over deliberation, and repetition over reflection. It thrives within the infrastructure of platform capitalism, where algorithms distribute visibility and memetic repetition amplifies affective resonance rather than substance.

As Enzo Traverso (2019) argues in *The New Faces of Fascism*, contemporary authoritarian formations often lack doctrinal coherence. Instead, they constitute affective responses to the symbolic and material crises of liberal modernity, marked by the collapse of collective imaginaries and the hollowing out of ideological vocabularies. Digital fascism is thus not a residue of the twentieth century, but a *mutation* – a digitally mediated, emotionally charged structure of ressentiment that occupies the void left by the decomposition of both neoliberal consensus and revolutionary alternatives.

Because the original nationalist discourse machine malfunctioned, its ideological grammar became flexible and opportunistic, transgressing traditional political boundaries. It could employ nationalism, left-wing populism, and anti-imperialist rhetoric – often combining these terms in self-contradictory ways. Crucially, its coherence is not logical but symbolic: a structure based on symbolic condensation, in which terms such as "sovereignty," "justice," or "the people" become emotionally charged signifiers, losing their theoretical depth. Indeed, online fascism is a reactive ideology – it does not

strike first, but waits for your discourse, then tears it apart with every available counter-narrative. It is a Proteus with fangs. This effect in discourse clearly arose from a contradictory nationalist ideology that failed to provide a truly material base for young people to navigate their difficulties and hardships. It yearns to annihilate everything but forgets that the watchdog has already lost its home.

This logic is vividly exemplified in Chinese digital fascism, particularly in the ideological formations surrounding the figure of Future, whom we discussed above – a pseudo-leftist digital influencer whose discourse fuses nationalist revivalism, anti-liberal populism, and distorted Marxist signifiers into a symbolically effective but intellectually contradictory framework. In his commentary on imperialism, for example, Future notoriously reduces Leninist imperialism theory to a vulgar power competition, claiming that “imperialism is simply the emperor of the capitalist order”, suggesting that imperialism is just the inevitable outcome of capitalist competition for power. This articulation simply neglects the deepening structural contradictions and economic motivations, and positions imperialism as a straightforward struggle for dominance between powers, thereby minimising the role of capitalist economic forces in shaping imperialist behaviour. This rhetorical flattening ignores the material foundations of Lenin’s analysis – particularly the role of monopoly capital, financialisation, and state-capital fusion in determining the imperialist stage of capitalism. Instead, Future substitutes geopolitical power for class analysis, fetishising state power while evacuating Marxist theory of its historical-materialist base.

More troubling is the mythic structure underpinning Future’s worldview. Drawing on Gentile’s theory of political religion and Eco’s study of fascist signs, Future’s rhetoric is organised not around material configuration but around symbolic purity and moral urgency. The “nation,” “people,” and “betrayers” are not political categories but floating signifiers within a closed symbolic economy. His followers are interpellated not as subjects of class struggle but as guardians of a violated moral order, invested in discursive policing, purity rituals, and aestheticised resentment.

This is the essence of digital fascism: not coherent ideology, but emotional condensation, not political strategy, but affective warfare. In China, online fascism emerges, regrettably, not from state directives but from grassroots conservatism, incubated in algorithmic loops, pseudo-Marxist rhetoric, and national humiliation narratives. It camouflages as leftist discourse, but its structure of identification is fascist: it sacrifices the nation, pathologises ambiguity, and displaces class antagonism into symbolic enemies. In this sense, digital fascism represents not the revival of old forms, but their transmutation under the conditions of contemporary monopolising infrastructural capitalism. It is a nuanced form of fascism without doctrine, sovereignty without institutions, and pseudo-revolution without antagonism – a new form of reaction rooted in the failure of political imagination, and in the unbearable symbolic contradictions of the present.

### 3.1. Political Discursive Hegemony of the State Apparatus

We now turn to how digital fascism operates in contemporary China, its mechanisms, and its driving forces.

Since the 1990s, the institutionalisation of the safety-stability regime has not merely policed dissent but also hegemonised political language itself. Through a dense network of propaganda, censorship, and ideological interpellation, the state has produced a discursive regime in which autonomous political expression is systematically delegitimised, pathologised, or criminalised. Anne-Marie Brady (2009) demonstrates that Chinese state propaganda has undergone a paradigmatic shift: from mobilising ideological conviction to managing affective consent. The goal is no longer to produce belief in a

revolutionary telos, but to pre-empt politicisation itself, particularly among the youth. Discursive technologies of power – ranging from curated social media ecosystems to moral-nationalist curricula – work not by suppressing ideas directly, but by narrowing the symbolic field within which political meaning can be generated.

As a result, the political is no longer experienced as a terrain of struggle but as a black box – abstract, remote, and ontologically opaque. For youth, politics is perceived less as a field of class antagonism or collective decision-making and more as a domain occupied by unknowable forces, immune to intervention. This discursive power produces a form of epistemological foreclosure: political language becomes unintelligible outside the state's sanctioned lexicon of narratives, producing a generation oriented toward moral judgment rather than collective praxis. Their symbolic resources – shaped by technocratic nationalism and depoliticised developmentalism – are structurally misaligned with antagonistic or transformative imaginaries. Political desire thus remains unarticulated, susceptible to redirection into mythologised, moralised, and aestheticised substitutes.

### 3.2. Nationalist Surges Amidst Capitalist Crisis and Economic Downturn

The intensifying economic contradictions of Chinese capitalism – rising youth unemployment, precarity among educated classes, and deepening spatial inequalities – have further destabilised the ideological foundation of the “Chinese Dream”. As the promises of upward mobility and developmental success grow increasingly inaccessible, the youth generation of Chinese people face a structural impasse: their aspirations remain confined to the symbolic horizon of nation-state legitimacy, yet their lived experience fundamentally contradicts that very narrative. In this context, nationalism re-surfaces not as a coherent political project but as an affective condensation of disillusionment. Rather than confronting the material basis of structural antagonisms, nationalism displaces political anxiety onto moralised binaries – outsiders, cultural traitors, and internal and external enemies – thereby preparing the symbolic vacuum for extremist rightism.

What distinguishes the current phase, however, is the qualitative transformation of nationalism itself. If, in the early reform era, nationalism functioned primarily as an ideological adhesive – a symbolic mechanism for reconciling the contradictions between developmentalism and the state's appropriation of Marxist legitimacy – then, in the present conjuncture, it has expanded into a totalising ideological form. Nationalism no longer sutures ideological dissonance.

Nationalism functions as the hegemonic grammar through which all social experience must be interpreted: it colonises the languages of justice, identity, dignity, and suffering, leaving little room for other political imaginaries to emerge. Its function is no longer merely compensatory but supersessive – it overwrites the unresolvable contradictions of Chinese capitalism and reconfigures political subjectivity around symbolic purity and moral injury. In this way, nationalism becomes not just a vehicle of affective cohesion but an ideological apparatus capable of metabolising discontent, converting it into loyalty rather than opposition. For youth who are structurally excluded yet symbolically interpellated as national subjects, nationalism offers the fantasy of collective agency in overcoming U.S. imperialism while foreclosing the possibility of political transformation and preparing for the emergence of digital fascism.



### 3.3. The Ideological Operation of Nationalist Discourse

In analysing China's online nationalism, Jack L. Qiu (2015) noted that nationalism initially became an important part of Internet culture through "image-driven" forms. This form of nationalism relied on visual media as carriers, spreading through videos, photographs, and social media images, thereby widely stimulating the public's sense of national identity and emotional resonance. However, over time, this image-driven nationalism has evolved beyond reliance on images and symbols, entering a more emotional and self-perpetuating cycle. In this cycle, nationalism constantly reinforces itself, becoming a vehicle for emotions and ideologies that drive further nationalist sentiments and actions. Nationalism is no longer merely transmitted through external images but has shifted toward emotional and moral expressions. This emotional nationalism gains new momentum through narratives of national suffering, victory, and revival.

Chinese nationalist discourse is thus not a random collection of slogans; it is built upon grand narratives – a mythological storyline that explains the past and envisions the future. These narratives construct a symbolic order, a framework for understanding the world and one's subjective position within it. They can also be understood as narrative structures that often resemble archetypal hero myths.

This ideological operation can be described as the "decline-suffering-renaissance" narrative. The plot unfolds as follows: we were once glorious; then, due to the machinations of our enemies, or perhaps internal weakness, we fell into humiliation or crisis; we endured great suffering; but now (or in the near future), under new leadership, we will rise again and reclaim our former glory. This is essentially a "death and rebirth" myth applied to the nation (Qian and Pun 2025b) that is presented as operating in five stages:

*Glorious Past:* Repeatedly articulated over thousands of years of uninterrupted civilisation and the achievements of ancient China (the splendour of the Han and Tang dynasties is often seen as the pinnacle of world civilisation, with China as the superpower of Asia). Additionally, culturally, Confucian harmony and Chinese inventions (such as gunpowder and the compass) are sources of pride – "While the West was barbaric, we were already advanced" is a common viewpoint.

*Decline/Humiliation:* From the First Opium War (1839-1842) to the victory of the Communist Party in 1949 is often referred to as the refusal of the "century of humiliation". In this narrative, China shifted from being the "Middle Kingdom" before the 1800s to a battlefield divided by imperialism. Traumatic events were repetitively narrated: the Opium Wars (where Britain forced China to consume opium and sign unequal treaties), the defeat by Japan in 1895 (ceding Taiwan), the Boxer Rebellion indemnities in 1900 (invasion by the Eight-Nation Alliance), the Japanese invasion from 1931-1945 (including the Nanjing Massacre and other large-scale atrocities), and internal weakening (the corrupt Qing government, warlord conflicts, etc.). Britain, Japan, France, and, to some extent, the United States – are in this narrative the obvious culprits of colonisation or exploitation of China.

*Suffering:* Chinese textbooks and museums emphasise the suffering of the Chinese people: cities burned, opium floods, loss of sovereignty, enormous indemnities, massacres by the Japanese, and so on. This "suffering narrative" aims to instil patriotism (never again will this happen) and gratitude towards the Communist Party for finally ending the suffering. These stories carry significant emotional weight in education – for example, every Chinese student knows the phrase "if you are backward, you will be beaten", which refers to the 19th-century defeat of China attributed to technological and military backwardness. Thus, shame and pain are etched into collective memory.

*Renaissance and Rebirth:* The discourse holds that the Renaissance began with the Chinese Revolution of 1911 (the overthrow of the monarchy by Sun Yat-sen), but it is primarily achieved by the Communist Revolution of 1949. Mao Zedong's famous 1949 declaration, "The Chinese people have stood up", is widely regarded as the beginning of this renaissance. However, the narrative acknowledges that the path to the Renaissance was not smooth (Mao's era was tumultuous, but propaganda covered many failures, such as the Great Leap Forward). The true renaissance is generally regarded as having occurred after the 1978 reforms and Deng Xiaoping's opening, which unleashed China's economic power. The Xi Jinping era (2012-present) is portrayed as a period in which China returns to the global stage and fully restores its wealth and power. Xi Jinping has stated that by 2049 (the 100th anniversary of the People's Republic of China), China will become a "developed, prosperous, and powerful country" – in other words, the mission will be accomplished, and the humiliation avenged.

*Destiny/Future:* The Chinese narrative suggests that China will reclaim its rightful position as a respected and possibly feared world leader. The country aims for reunification, such as with Taiwan, and envisions establishing a harmonious global order with Chinese culture celebrated worldwide. This vision is often called the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation". Its approach focuses more on restoring past glory than on conquering other nations, as Chinese discourse does not advocate colonising others for revenge. Instead, it presents China as a benevolent rising power that will protect its interests firmly.

This narrative also establishes a moral code: it is not merely a chronological sequence but a teleological (goal-oriented) story. To achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, the moral guidelines are: obedience to the Party, hard work, maintaining unity (not allowing dissent to weaken the nation), and guarding against enemies.

Symbolically, these narratives also use key symbols and ritualistic events to solidify the myth. For the Nazis, the annual Nuremberg rallies functioned as a rebirth ritual (with the symbolism of flags and blood, etc.). In China, events such as National Day parades (especially the large parades for the 60th and 70th anniversaries) are intended to dramatically showcase "look at how far we have come, from the humiliation of 1949 to now having advanced missile formations." Another example is the "Road to Rejuvenation" exhibition at the National Museum of China, which explicitly guides visitors through the narrative journey from the Opium Wars and humiliation, through the Communist revolution, to today's achievements – this is a space with an educational purpose.

### 3.4. Digital Fascism as the Resignification of Nationalism

The convergence of ideological incoherence, economic stagnation, and symbolic dislocation today may, on the one hand, produce radical left politics, as evidenced by the student-worker unity in the Jasic Struggle of 2018 (Pun 2021), but it can also create a distorted picture of failed politicisation. The unresolved affective residue has been transfigured into mythologisation. This mythologisation is not merely a narrative style; it is the symbolic mechanism through which youth, stripped of political capacity and discursive power, are reabsorbed into the state's ideological apparatuses. Crucially, mythologisation should not be seen as a spontaneous cultural response, but as a structural effect of the ideological state apparatuses, which have successfully transformed nationalism into the foundational symbolic framework through which all discontent must now be expressed.

For youth caught in this matrix, political subjectivity fails to crystallise through the praxis of leftist vision. Instead, it emerges as *narrative immersion* in symbolic structures that offer emotional intensity, moral absolutism, and semiotic saturation, pre-empting radical political agenda, tactics, or collective initiatives. They speak in terms drawn from nationalism, history, or revolutionary fragments, but only as isolated signs – *floating signifiers* whose referential power is disconnected from political-economic structure.

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified many of these trends and has become a crucible for digital fascism. At the onset of the pandemic, as the Chinese government vigorously promoted its success in controlling the virus through strict lockdowns and compared it with the chaotic conditions and high death tolls in the United States and Europe, domestic national pride surged. Official media and millions of netizens eagerly discussed images of China sending aid abroad – masks and vaccine boxes bearing the Chinese flag – while depicting Western countries as powerless. This propaganda was sometimes accompanied by a sense of gloating or moral superiority: “Look at how China takes care of its own people, while the arrogant West has failed its people”. In fact, the official narrative claimed that this crisis demonstrated the validity of China’s system and urged citizens to be proud of a country that could “build a hospital in 10 days” and swiftly control the pandemic in ways even wealthy democratic nations could not.

In recent years, platforms like Zhihu have seen a rise in nationalistic discussions, such as questions like “What advantages of China were demonstrated by the failure of the West in the COVID-19 pandemic?” or “How should China respond to U.S. slander against Xinjiang?”. The most popular responses usually contain bitter outbursts condemning Western imperialism for betrayal and hypocrisy, while highlighting Chinese unity under Communist Party leadership. For instance, in debates about U.S. sanctions on Huawei, many Zhihu users combined technical arguments with patriotic anger, saying, “The Americans fear Huawei because they fear China’s rise”, and calling for self-reliance and reciprocation: “returning the favor in kind”. A scholarly analysis of Huawei-related comments on Zhihu noted that this creates a “double-edged sword” effect: netizens feel anger at Western bullying but also shame over China’s perceived weakness – these conflicting emotions intensify nationalist fervour (Na and Pun 2023). This reveals the complex feelings in Chinese nationalist discourse: a mix of pride shaped by historic suffering and a confident belief in eventual victory.

Contemporary Chinese nationalism is heavily influenced by memories of past victimisation, such as the Opium Wars and the Japanese invasion, and is driven by a strong belief that China is now destined to regain its ancient glory. This narrative follows a familiar pattern of decline and resurgence: from the humiliating “dark century” to the current “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”. This story is taught to every Chinese elementary student and frequently appears in speeches and media. Textbooks and museums highlight how foreign powers once devastated and divided China, contrasting that past with China’s current achievements, such as launching rockets to Mars and building high-speed rail. The implicit (and sometimes explicit) message is that China will never be oppressed again; it now stands tall. Nationalist discourse actively reinforces this message, with social media inflamed by celebrations of Chinese success – such as Olympic gold medals accompanied by prideful remarks like, “China’s rise fills me with pride, no one can bully us now”. When Chinese-born Canadian singer Kris Wu was convicted, Weibo erupted with cheers of “Foreign nationality can’t save you – Chinese law is supreme!” Each example underscores China’s strength,

independence, and dignity, often contrasting these qualities with “others” – Western countries, critics, or historical oppressors.

Fanatical nationalist rhetoric is also evident in more down-to-earth or popular cultural forms: patriotic pop songs, viral memes, and internet slang. One popular online nationalist slogan is “厉害了我的国” (“My country is awesome!”), which comes from a propaganda documentary. Netizens use it both sincerely to praise China’s achievements and ironically to mock them. Another term that evolved from memes into a popular phrase is “Wolf Warrior” – sometimes, nationalists proudly call themselves “Wolf Warriors” when arguing online with foreigners, gladly accepting this combative title. On the other hand, nationalist netizens mockingly refer to Chinese citizens who criticise the country as “traitors” or “fifth columnists” (i.e., collaborators), invoking the spectre of treason during colonial invasions. This rhetoric can become extremely venomous: some well-known liberals or feminists are labelled “Western slaves” or “white left-wing dogs” and even accused by nationalist trolls of being CIA agents, essentially portraying them as internal “others” allied with foreign enemies. This shows how the “self/other” binary in nationalist discourse can lead to internal societal divisions: anyone who is not “patriotic enough” is symbolically expelled from the “people’s community” and categorised as a despised external “other.”

As Emilio Gentile (2006) argues, such formations resemble political religions – symbolic orders that sacralise suffering in the absence of transformative politics. This produces a closed symbolic economy in which affect circulates within an impermeable system of moralised references. Youth may feel intensely political, yet some are engaged in mimetic performance, reproducing signs of political identity without participating in collective transformation. Within this structure, myth functions as both affective compensation and ideological closure. Over time, this symbolic economy hardens into an affective regime that values purity over contradiction, unity over antagonism, and belonging over agency. Myth becomes the gateway through which fascist desire is normalised. Thus, digital fascism enters not as an alien rupture but as the latent telos of failed politicisation – an encrypted logic embedded in nationalist myth, aesthetic posture, and moral absolutism.

In this sense, digital fascism is not merely a symptom but the ideological infrastructure of capitalism. It renders certain youth subjects intelligible to the hegemonic order while foreclosing radical potential. It does not challenge the symbolic system but intensifies its grip, re-enchanting the political in a depoliticised form. Digital fascism, then, is not born of a rejection of nationalism but of its saturation – its transformation into a totalising moral-aesthetic framework that absorbs all desire, discontent, and identity, leaving no outside from which to speak.

#### 4. The Emerging Political Subjectivity of Digital Fascism

We finally touch upon the formation of the subject of digital fascism. The subject’s journey is, in fact, a reactive dialogue with the nationalist discourse machine. In the first extreme moment, the subject depends on this discourse, giving rise to abstract moralism. In the second moment, when the state machine fails to meet the demands articulated by the subject, it adopts a universalist liberal stance. In the third moment, the subject observes the failure of so-called democratic countries worldwide and the collapse of the universal ideal. The subject then begins to waver. At this point, a critical choice arises: the state’s violent questioning transforms some people into online fascists, while others become firm leftists.

Digital fascism should not be understood as an isolated cultural phenomenon but as a product of the profound structural transformation of China's economic base and ideological structure following reforms. The emergence of the online fascist subjectivity is rooted in the disintegration of the political community, the loss of state discourse hegemony, the moralisation of nationalism, and the illusory return of class struggle. Together, these factors constitute the symbolic and material conditions that enable the emergence of post-socialist authoritarian subjectivity. The digital fascist subject is the outcome of a dialectic of negation, in which the collapse of revolutionary universals, the closure of symbolic space, and the saturation of nationalist affect combine to produce a structurally depoliticised yet symbolically overdetermined subjectivity. Let us examine the operability of this political subjectivity across three layers: abstract morality, false universality, and negative reflexivity.

#### 4.1. Abstract Morality

The genesis of digital fascism lies not in ideological sophistication but in affective moralisation, aesthetically mediated through nationalist vocabulary. At this initial stage, nationalism does not operate as a geopolitical strategy, nor as a programmatic political doctrine. Instead, it manifests as a depoliticised ethical form – a symbolic economy in which moral clarity is projected onto the figure of the nation, and collective identity is elevated to a sacred object. The political subject here is not yet capable of agency; instead, they act as a *moral guardian*, defending an idealised community from perceived symbolic contamination.

The rise of the subject as a moral guardian is not incidental but deeply embedded in China's historical, cultural, and political traditions. Even without explicit Confucian teachings, the persistent influence of Confucian family roles – jun jun, chen chen, fu fu, zi zi (the ruler is the ruler, the minister is the minister, the father is the father, and the son is the son) – continues to shape social morality. These hierarchical norms promote obedience and loyalty, framing morality mainly as relational duties based on roles rather than rights. At the same time, a parallel moral perspective develops from socialist revolutionary heritage: the ideal of the “communist new man”, driven by self-sacrifice, ideological clarity, and collective discipline, offers an alternative yet compatible moral model. Loyalty to the state is thus expressed as personal moral integrity. Together, these traditions cultivate a subjectivity primed not for conscious political action but for affective allegiance – ready to perform moral vigilance against symbolic contamination in the name of the collective. From this conjuncture, the figure of the moral guardian arises, not as a thinker or agent of transformation, but as a custodian of purity within an ideologically saturated symbolic field.

Within this symbolic structure, ambiguity becomes betrayal, dissent becomes treason, and contradiction becomes corruption. This moral absolutism displaces antagonism and substitutes structural critique with binary sentimentality. Rather than interrogating contradictions within capitalist modernity or state ideology, the digital-fascist subject seeks personal redemption through national fidelity. As political discourse is foreclosed by state censorship and ideological control, these youth in question are socialised into moral judgment without political agency. Their grievances are mapped not onto systems or institutions but onto abstract signifiers like “the motherland,” “the people”, or “sovereignty”. A prominent example of this subject is embodied in the “Little Pinks” (*xiaofenhong*) – a loosely defined cohort of young Chinese netizens characterised by militant nationalism, aestheticised patriotism, and digital vigilantism. Though initially an apolitical nickname derived from the pink colour theme of the literary site *Jinjiang Literature City*, the term evolved to designate a new subjectivity: young,

internet-savvy individuals who engage in symbolic defence of the Chinese state on global digital platforms, often through mass commenting campaigns, doxing, or harassment of dissenting voices. This group displays many of the traits central to digital fascist moral subjectivity: a binary view of identity, hyper-sensitivity to symbolic insult, and a compulsion to affirm national purity through online action, often detached from any concrete political program.

Their affective attachment to the Chinese state is hardly based on historical analysis or collective praxis. On the contrary, on the moral imaginary of victimhood and dignity, the populist sentiments are often directed against perceived external threats – Western media, diasporic dissidents, ethnic minorities. Moralised nationalism – although decentralised, affectively charged, and lacking doctrinal unity – functions as the first moment in a fascist grammar of identification. It fuses resentment with symbolic unity, flattening complexity into slogans and moral absolutes. In this sense, the digital fascist subject does not initially pursue power but moral revenge, not transformation but purification. Thus, nationalism, in its abstract moral form, provides a gateway affective regime – a pre-political mode of symbolic ordering that prepares the terrain for further authoritarian subject-formation.

#### 4.2. False Universality: Liberal and Socialist Fragments as Misrecognised Praxis

Following the breakdown of moralised nationalism, the digital fascist subject enters its first dialectical *Aufhebung* (sublation) – the illusory ascent toward universalism. Disenchanted with the affective absolutism of nationalism, the subject turns to liberal and socialist discourses in search of genuine politicisation. Yet, in the absence of organisational structure and ideological rigor, this turn fails to produce genuine political subjectivity. It instead collapses into a simulacrum of politics: a surface-level engagement with emancipatory language devoid of content.

In the Chinese setting, this illusion of universality appears in two main ways. Firstly, liberalism devolves into moralised libertarianism, which is motivated not by a structural critique of authority but by expressive individualism and reactive morality. Among China's urban middle class and intellectuals, liberal ideas often reduce to expressions of personal grievances and symbolic acts of resistance, with a focus on "speaking out" rather than on developing collective plans for institutional change. What persists is a rhetorical focus on "freedom" and "rights" that is disconnected from material realities or social classes.

Secondly, the socialist vocabulary has become aestheticised and disconnected from its historical roots in class struggle. Some young people who see themselves as "leftist" tend to romanticise working-class symbols and anti-capitalist slogans. However, they do so primarily in online spaces that are divorced from real labour conflicts. This leads to a stylised form of 'workerism' – found in memes, subcultural styles, and Marxist language – that lacks practical organisation and a genuine link to contemporary proletarian conditions.

Thus, justice and emancipation become floating signifiers – grandiose terms repeated for self-legitimation rather than for constructing political alternatives. What emerges is not a re-activation of the political, but its simulation: a mimetic engagement with radical signifiers that substitutes discursive performance for collective strategy. Detached from grassroots mobilisation and mass organisation, both liberal and socialist discourses risk becoming symbolic veneers. They offer an illusion of politicisation that ultimately feeds into digital fascism's structure, where progressive vocabularies are absorbed and neutralised within depoliticised, aestheticised forms.

### 4.3. Negative Reflexivity

The collapse of universalist aspirations – whether mediated through moralised nationalism or the simulacra of liberal and socialist discourse – does not produce renewed political agency. Instead, it precipitates a regression into myth: a symbolic structure that re-narrates political failure as moral transcendence. This retreat is not toward renewed ethics or strategic praxis, but toward affective enclosure. Confronted with the contradiction between political desire and systemic foreclosure, the subject re-signifies injury through symbolic compensation rather than transformation. The result is a *hermeneutic enclosure* in which symbolic unity substitutes for political antagonism and collective agency is disavowed in favour of sacrificial righteousness.

This logic is epitomised in the trajectory of a number of the post-2010s digital youth subjects, whose personal narratives often illustrate the transformation of political disillusionment into moralised myth. “Without the Communist Party, there would be no New China”, and now it is updated to “Only the Communist Party can make China prosperous”. This narrative equates loyalty to the Party with patriotism. As a result, nationalist sentiment is used to suppress dissent: Criticise the Party → you are an anti-China element → you are scum. This has led most citizens to maintain a unified stance, as, except for a few dissidents, no one wants to be seen as a traitor to their country. This creates a powerful force of silencing and self-censorship.

Educated in philosophy and active in online pedagogical spaces, many left-wing students initially engaged with labour issues and achieved a rare convergence of theory and practice. However, following state repression due to labour activism, many of them reoriented their stance away from collective struggle toward individualised, voluntarist moralism<sup>1</sup>. Abandoning the project of labour politicisation, these young subjects reframed structural antagonism as ethical deviance. Their denunciation of the eight-hour workday as a “Western conspiracy,” and their attacks on pro-labour platforms as subversive or foreign-aligned, reflect a mythologised affective defence of failure. Instead of organising resistance, they offer charity; instead of class analysis, they advance narratives of national sacrifice. This move marks not only the abandonment of praxis, but its aesthetic reversal: a depoliticised spectacle of virtue in which political impossibility is transfigured into moral purity. The subject formed within this affective structure no longer seeks transformation but symbolic vindication. Justice is no longer collective or material but symbolic and identitarian. The disempowered youth, unable to intervene in structures of power, takes refuge in the fantasy of purity, in which betrayal explains everything and suffering guarantees virtue. In such a mythic imaginary, critique becomes taboo, and solidarity is replaced by performative rectitude.

What emerges is a distinctly digital-fascist subjectivity: one that mimics the aesthetics of political life while retreating from its substance. Myth here is not a nostalgic return, but a forward-moving enclosure – an affective regime that metabolises disillusionment into moral absolutism, displacing the political with symbolic coherence. It is the closure of the dialectic: a stage in which all political contradiction is resolved, not through struggle, but through myth.

## 5. Concluding Remark: Reclaiming the Political

A significant concern has long haunted the left: before Marx’s spectre re-enters the world, will the ghost of fascism find rebirth in a new form, once again igniting the dark flames of the world? The emergence of digital fascism is shaped by a period in which

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.reddit.com/r/zizek/comments/1f5ccqj/some\\_comments\\_by\\_the\\_chinese\\_left-wing\\_activist/?tl=zh-hant](https://www.reddit.com/r/zizek/comments/1f5ccqj/some_comments_by_the_chinese_left-wing_activist/?tl=zh-hant) (accessed on 29 August 2026)

two empires, the United States and China, are locked in fierce competition. These empires, with their glaring eyes, are not defined by their success – rather, their souls linger in every moment of decline. To try again, to confront fascism, means anticipating and eliminating it before it fully forms. In our earlier writings (Qian and Pun, 2025), we discussed the mirroring effect between China and the United States – how their ideological systems are semi-symmetrical, stemming directly from the competitive flow of capital between the two empires. Digital fascism, as exemplified by figures like Nick Land (2022) in the United States and Silicon Valley right-wingers, represents a form of technofascism, while in China, figures like the Little Pinks embody the growth of a strong, nationalist state.

Faced with a powerful nationalist discourse machine, the left seems in a difficult position. Merely engaging in political name-calling is insufficient. Digital fascism is precisely the result of this chaotic name-calling. Although the nationalist discourse machine is collapsing, it has been reorganised into an invincible moral weapon by a chaotic subject and a technocratic state. We must recognise that this discourse emerged during the rise of global infrastructural capitalism in China. The fight against digital fascism is ongoing. It must be an active struggle, both ideologically and practically, with relentless dedication and even despair. We must not abandon the opportunity that each historical moment offers, even if those moments appear to repeat past myths. A leftist strategy cannot merely critique from the outside – it must reconstruct from within. The antidote to digital fascism is not moral denunciation or semantic correction, but the active production of counter-hegemonic commons: spaces, practices, and institutions that re-enable collective agency, political literacy, and antagonistic imagination.

In short, as we conclude this paper, we don't have a better suggestion than to propose political commoning as a way of de-fascisation that deserves further exploration. It is not simply a refusal of fascist affect but a material and symbolic reorganisation of commoning life in opposition to fascist closure. It means creating infrastructural power of labour in which solidarity replaces surveillance, collective deliberation displaces moralised reaction, and political strategy overcomes aesthetic identity. It entails the reconstruction of leftist forms – unions, collectives, political networks, commons – not as nostalgic reenactments but as situated responses to contemporary conditions of digital alienation and capitalist fragmentation.

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