

The Operation of Moe: A Discourse Practice of Cyber Nationalism

Lingyu Wang^{1,a,*}

¹Department of Communication, Shenzhen University, Shenzhen, China

a. wanglingyuuu0001@163.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: Unlike the previous cyber-nationalism events characterized by anger and hatred, the "Panda Ya Ya" incident highlights a special form of "soft emotion." This paper focuses on the common representation of this soft emotion in both self-media and official media discourse practices: moe. Through Fairclough's discourse analysis, the specific mechanisms of its operation are explored to understand the emotional motivations in cyber nationalism. The study finds that at the levels of representation and style, the "moe discourse" in the Ya Ya incident is co-created by self-media and official media as: floating factual evidence, repeatedly performed legitimacy, and normalized political figures. However, there are characteristic differences in "time-space representation" and register between the two. The operation of moe discourse is premised on human participation, with the relationship between moe objects and humans essentially being "agented agency." Finally, the soft emotion manifested by moe discourse exhibits more significant network characteristics, relying on more universal human values, and more closely resembling the fulfillment of emotional needs. This can be viewed as a new, more powerful "commonality" resource in the development of cyber-nationalism. However, the operation of soft emotions in cyber-nationalism often remains in a state of "unfinished" without a directed outcome, becoming a kind of "emotional machine running idle."

Keywords: moe, cyber-nationalism, soft emotion, discourse analysis.

1. Introduction

"Please don't forget Ya Ya. Don't stop caring about her just because she's old, tormented, no longer good-looking, and not cute." From February 22, 2023, Weibo self-media and personal accounts began posting about the topics of panda Ya Ya being "thin" and "begging for food," sparking public debate. Named "Ya Ya," the panda was sent to the United States as part of a giant panda protection and research project between China and the Memphis Zoo in 2003. Near the end of 2022, as the 20-year lease was about to expire, Ya Ya was set to be returned to China. At the beginning of 2023, a netizen posted a photo on Weibo showing Ya Ya's current condition in the Memphis Zoo, appearing thin and disheveled, which raised concerns about her health. Netizens called for the relevant parties to bring her back as soon as possible, creating a wave of public opinion.

Nationalism involves issues of nation-state construction, exploration, and construction of national and state identity, and the construction and behavior of civic nationalism, addressing both "external" and "internal" aspects [1]. In the Chinese context, Liu Hailong defines "nationalism" in Chinese

cyber-nationalism events as a neutral grassroots nationalism that involves bottom-up identity and culture, emphasizing "nation-state" rather than Han ethnicity [2]. Furthermore, some scholars emphasize the shaping of nationalism by the internet as a medium from the perspective of communication technology, noting that one significant manifestation of this change is the shift of nationalist events from the top-down approach of the traditional print era to the bottom-up emergence in the internet era.

However, the Ya Ya incident stands out among many nationalist and cyber-nationalism events. In previous analyses of cyber-nationalism events, many scholars have mentioned the "strong emotions" within them, specifically manifested as "anger": "Xiao Gongqin considered nationalism as the world's strongest and most emotional ideology, with nationalist movements often accompanied by intense emotional expressions and violent conflicts, making emotional control difficult [3]. " In contrast, the Ya Ya incident introduced new discourse features, such as "cuteness" and "moe". The concept of "moe" originated from Japan's anime industry in the 1990s, synonymous with "burning" and "budding" in Japanese, originally referring to a strong love and fascination with virtual characters in anime or games, later becoming a general psychological tendency of the public towards cuteness, innocence, and a desire for protection, with highly subcultural and postmodern attributes [4]. The unique characteristics of the Ya Ya incident form the basis of this study. By focusing on "moe" discourse, this paper aims to explore the discourse practices in online nationalism events driven by soft emotions.

2. Research Methods

This study selected Sina Weibo (hereafter referred to as "Weibo"), the main platform for the event's fermentation, as the research object, focusing on content published by official media and self-media. This study employs Norman Fairclough's discourse analysis, which focuses on how texts are composed of heterogeneous elements, providing a more inclusive analytical framework for analyzing the loosely structured texts in the Ya Ya incident, based on three modes of social practice of discourse—Representation, Action, and Identification. The research period ended on April 26, 2023, covering the complete process from netizens' exposure to Ya Ya's return to China, adequately reflecting the discourse practices of both media in this cyber-nationalism event. Using "Ya Ya" as a keyword, combining the "hot" column and "media release" column within each trending topic, the study selected the texts with the highest popularity from self-media and official media accounts, totaling 127 text samples. The accounts involved include official media such as People's Daily, Xinhua Video, China Daily and others, as well as over 50 professional self-media and personal self-media accounts. Besides textual information, the samples also include 64 pictures and 80 videos, which are considered in the discourse analysis.

3. Moe in Discourse and Representation

3.1. Time-Space Representation: Strategies and Appeals

The study found that, unlike the continuous temporal and spatial presentation by self-media, Weibo's official media accounts, as one of the professional media outlets primarily responsible for disseminating news facts, posted numerous "fresh facts" related to the progress of the Ya Ya incident. However, they often used "moe" as a tool to reconstruct and represent time and space, embedding the Ya Ya incident within the context of other events.

The fractured spatiotemporal representation and the continuous spatiotemporal representation reflect the different levels of refinement in the construction of "moe discourse" by official media and self-media, and reveal the different strategies and appeals behind them. Regarding the so-called "concern of netizens," the official media do not provide further explanations about Ya Ya's health

status but shift the space-time to the past, focusing entirely on Ya Ya's previous state. It can be seen that the official media have more detailed considerations in content construction, using more complex and targeted background information and using "moe" expressions to make this deliberate design relaxed and natural. In contrast, self-media implement "daily guardianship" of Ya Ya's condition, paying more attention to responding to netizens' real-time concerns about Ya Ya's condition. Even if there are some strategic factors (such as providing long-term material sources for self-media accounts), the core is still driven by "appeals"—the related content can only maintain popularity because of the readers' needs as netizens. However, it is worth noting that the representation of Ya Ya's condition by self-media is also the result of filtering through "moe discourse." It overlooks the diversity of panda species' habits [5] and focuses only on displaying eating show footage that better meets netizens' content consumption needs. This discourse behavior actually reflects a naivety on the part of both the self-media account operators and the netizens in their "guardianship" appeal for Ya Ya.

3.2. Evidence Oscillation: The Fictitiousness of "Moe" and the Attenuation of Grassroots Characteristics

The study found that "moe" is flexibly used by official media to guide trending topics and is employed to represent different aspects of both the "positive" and "negative" attributes of events.

Both official and self-media use "moe" as oscillating factual evidence, reflecting on the one hand the fictitiousness of moe discourse, and on the other hand, the attenuation of the grassroots nature in this online nationalism event. Official media and self-media construct "evidence" with moe discourse, placing Ya Ya between "pitiful" and "cute," unfolding corresponding "moe imaginations" following trending topics, with little objective factual support. The fictitiousness of "moe" as a discourse is fully revealed at this level. According to Weibo's topic hosts, the guidance of trending topics is actually set by official media. Self-media, following the official media's topic settings, correspondingly use moe discourse as "positive-negative oscillating" evidence, also reflecting the initial independent "bottom-up" aspect being integrated into the official narrative and gradually led by entities other than netizens. Amid the repeated "guarding" and calls of "Auntie is waiting for you," netizens spontaneously organized a political carnival, and this carnival, with its mild and positive characteristics, was more widely accepted by official media, receiving new rounds of feedback and promotion, becoming a "conscious, bounded" carnival. Compared to the violent force that emotions like anger can break through boundaries, soft emotions seem to become a more controllable public opinion resource in this event, more accepted and deftly adopted by media, government, and technology platforms. This, to some extent, highlights the limited nature of the "bottom-up" aspect in online nationalism events driven by soft emotions.

4. Moe in Discourse and Action

4.1. Animal News: Positive and Sustainable Resources

The soft emotions represented by "moe" seem to be more adaptable to the internet ecosystem, demonstrating a more vigorous and enduring vitality in events of online nationalism. Through the operation of "moe" discourse, the Yaya incident permeated into the daily discourse of netizens under the guise of entertainment and relaxation. Contrary to destructive emotions, "moe" discourse can propagate through "positive emotions". After the peak period, the Yaya incident continued to extend its lifecycle through "moe" discourse for a long time. Various animal news discourses essentially constructed a picture of Yaya's leisurely life after returning to China, in stark contrast to her previous living conditions. This "later" life presentation, both in terms of the timeline and the production of "moe" discourse, is nearly infinite. Based on the simplicity of discourse construction (as mentioned

earlier regarding the fictional nature of "moe" discourse) and the audience's "acceptance and recognition" (according to the 2021 Kuaishou Pet Ecology Report, "cute pet" videos have become a major content segment with peak daily views exceeding 1.2 billion), "moe" is easily reproduced under the strong agenda-setting of official media. Invisibly, the narration of the event becomes imbalanced, gradually deviating from the initial revelation of the truth and drifting towards an unbounded realm due to the fictional nature of "moe" discourse itself. It is noteworthy that the "moe" discourse constructed by official media often harbors deeper register structures, implicitly containing more speech functions such as "suggestions" and "requests." These speech functions persist under the guise of "animal news," exerting effects beyond a single, explosive collective excitement.

4.2. The Call of Moe: Beyond Interpretation and Purpose

In contrast to typical advocacy or proposal statements, the related discourse from self-media also exhibits distinct characteristics of a "call-to-action" register. However, unlike traditional call-to-action registers, the "background explanation" part is supplemented by moe expressions that depict Ya Ya as an innocent child.

The "moe call" register relies entirely on "appearance," focusing on the touching depiction of Yaya's living conditions. Based on the fundamental register of the call, the intertextual recurrence of the existing register in readers' minds serves as a subtle "interpretation," indicating that the part before the call should be a factual background review. Thus, at this point, "moe" somewhat blurs the boundary of "interpretation" with "appearance," bypassing evidence and logic to directly reach the attitudes and behaviors of netizens. Being "cuteness-struck" becomes the core trigger for participating in the online nationalism event.

Here, the "moe" discourse exists beyond interpretation and rationality, driven by netizens' emotions, which can even be seen as a need. In this context, soft emotions and hard emotions often blend and parallel. In self-media's "moe call," the transition from being "cuteness-struck" to "hatred," "opposition," and "anger" further induces netizens to participate in related protection actions. However, the behavior of netizens moved by the call often remains at the level of "retweeting on Weibo" or "original posts plus sharing on other social media." Unlike events of online nationalism like "Diba Expedition," the "moe call" does not specify detailed action plans or collective goals, evolving into a scattered, "self-entertained" emotional expression. It quickly mobilizes netizens' emotions but does not seem to have a clear vision for the next steps. The fuzzy and vacant end of the call chain is wrapped in the compassion and national sentiment evoked in netizens, repeatedly produced and consumed.

5. Moe in Style and Identification

5.1. The Moral Path of Moe: The Performance of Legitimacy

In the discourse practice of the Times Square display, "moe" language provides a near-demonstrative emotional experience in a non-violent manner. Unlike hard-edged nationalist events, the protest in Ya Ya's case is indirect and implicit, constructing the act of "demonstration" through "moe" discourse. This form of demonstration is somewhat concealed and shared among those with the same national identity, losing its effect in the physical world—it should be directed at the object, aiming to convey and intimidate. Without clear understanding from the target, it turns into a self-directed demonstration, a form of emotional satisfaction equivalent to violence.

Both social media and official media use "moe" discourse to construct their legitimacy, leading to calls and demonstrations that seem to be pure performances. These "moe" discourses immerse themselves in realizing logic, moral positions, and legitimacy through repeated performances, often constituting the entire meaning.

5.2. "Weakening" and "Selfing": The Extraordinary Becoming Ordinary

The personification of Ya Ya has been repeatedly mentioned in prior analyses; however, Ya Ya's identity in these discourses has not been clearly identified. In the later stages of the event, the term "escort" appears in many social media and official media discourses, revealing a sense of Ya Ya's "extraordinary" status. "Escort" means "to accompany and protect to a certain place, ensuring personnel or goods are not harmed along the way," indicating that Ya Ya is not categorized as "goods" but as a "personnel." Historical references, such as in "Romance of the Three Kingdoms," where "Cao Song wanted to travel, and Tao Qian personally sent him out of the city, specially sending Colonel Zhang Kai and 500 soldiers to escort," illustrate that those "escorted" often hold high status, typically linked to political identity. Thus, a fact often overlooked is that from the beginning "living in America" to being "escorted," Ya Ya has always had significant political implications in this event. To some extent, Ya Ya is also a political representative.

However, this political role's "extraordinary" nature is diluted by Ya Ya's animal identity as a panda and further cloaked by "ordinary" through social media and official media's "moe" discourse construction. Specifically, "ordinary" is achieved through "weakening." Descriptions of Ya Ya's endearing appearance by social media and "cloud companionship" published by official media, establishing a "protection" and "care" relationship between netizens and Ya Ya, shape Ya Ya into a weak identity object through visual and emotional stimulation of "moe." This resonates with Wu Ming's definition of "moe" in the Chinese context—"moe" entities are not perfect but have weaknesses and are real, bridging the connection to the ordinary through Ya Ya's weaknesses and reality. Additionally, "moe" discourse deepens ordinary identity through "selfing." Social media frequently refers to Ya Ya as "baby" or "child," and addresses themselves as "relatives" or "aunties," transforming Ya Ya into a "family member" close to us. Unlike hard and lofty "extraordinary," Ya Ya is demoted to a weak status while establishing close relations with the ordinary public, becoming more attractive through "softness and ordinariness," thus distancing from absolute "extraordinary."

6. Conclusion

The research found that the moe discourse practices of official and social media during this incident share prominent similarities in terms of reproduction and style but differ in spatiotemporal reproduction and register:

Table 1: The Practice of Moe Discourse in Online Nationalism during the Ya Ya Incident

	Similarities	Differences
Official Media	Hifting factual evidence、	Fractured representation of space and time、Animal news
Social Media	Performance of legitimacy、 Extraordinary normalization	Continuous representation of space and time、the call of moe

The operation of moe discourse also highlights a form of "proxy agency." Cute animals, constructed by official and social media, became flexible discourse resources in online nationalist events. The "agency" of the panda Ya Ya as the subject of cute performance is actually false; its behavioral state is freely woven into political propaganda and emotional appeals by both official and social media, yet it is objectified and purified through the apparent "agency" of the animal subject. Wu Ming emphasized the unidirectionality of "cute creatures" at the visual level, introducing the concept of "soft politics." This study further expands the interpretation of the operational mechanism of such "soft politics of cuteness." First, the unidirectional power relationship between "cute

creatures" and the audience is not only manifested visually but also directly in their lack of subjectivity in event participation. This lack is expressed as a form of "detachment": Ya Ya's role in the Ya Ya incident is unrelated to Ya Ya itself; as a panda, Ya Ya becomes a floating signifier, arbitrarily interpreted and spoken of by social and official media in the human world. Therefore, the strong applicability of cuteness as a political discourse resource is worth caution. Second, the "cuteness" of "cute creatures" in political events naturally aligns with contemporary imaginations of the "perfect political figure," characterized by "weakness" and "approachability" beyond authority. Ya Ya's once weakened subjectivity in the event participation was recognized and acknowledged on the biological entity of "panda," transforming into a "lovable" political representative. While this affection radiates to the overall political power, the true political subject behind it remains hidden. Furthermore, the political implications of "proxy agency" also lie in the relationship between humans and objects/creatures. How to genuinely endow the actors of objects with a status of "having agency" and ensure this agency is truly recognized and reproduced will be a more profound issue.

However, the operation of soft emotions in online nationalism often remains in an "incomplete" state with no clear outcome, becoming a kind of "emotion machine running idle." Owing to the fictional nature of 'moe' discourse, the related discursive practices gain considerable flexibility and malleability, such as the "cute-style appeals" in register, the "morality of cuteness," and "protests of cuteness" in style. However, unlike previous online nationalist events, which typically had strong (often unattainable) demands and objectives, the demands in the YaYa incident exist in a gray area. Throughout the event, the online nationalism constructed through national identity and adversarial sentiments ostensibly demands the return of YaYa by the American side and the homecoming of YaYa to China. Yet, due to the expiration of the pre-existing agreement with the American side and the lack of divergent opinions on the matter, this demand does not necessitate "struggle" to be fulfilled. This is particularly evident in discursive practices such as the self-directed "protests of cuteness" and "moe appeals" lacking any directives for action. On both the creation and reception levels, soft emotions can efficiently stimulate national sentiment. However, this "emotion machine" runs idle, disconnected from the broader "action machine" of online nationalism. In this incident, the soft emotions represented by 'moe' discourse seem to become repeatedly created and consumed emotional commodities. Both the netizen community and officials exhibit a strong enthusiasm for "creating 'struggle'" and being emotionally moved by cuteness. The exact nature of the products generated by this "idle emotion machine" warrants further investigation.

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