6

MANUFACTURING DISTRUST

Online Political Opposition and Its Backlash

> Some people said that two hundred died in the Square and others claimed that two thousand died. There were also stories of tanks running over students who were trying to leave. I have to say that I did not see any of that. I don't know [where] those people did [see these things]. I myself was in the Square until six thirty in the morning. I kept thinking, are we going to use lies to attack an enemy who lies? Aren't facts powerful enough? To tell lies against our enemy's lies only satisfies our need to vent our anger, but it's a dangerous thing to do. Maybe your lies will be exposed, and you'll be powerless to fight your enemy.[1]
>
> —HOU DEJIAN, IN *TIANANMEN: THE GATE OF HEAVENLY PEACE*

The Swedish scholar Johan Lagerkvist argues that the struggle in Chinese cyberspace is better viewed as a competition among Party-state, youth/subaltern, and transnational business norms, which is fostering normative change and helping move the nation toward inclusive democracy.[2] This perspective of norms competition is valuable, though many may disagree with the optimistic prediction of a normative move toward inclusive democracy. It is clear that online expression in China is not merely a story of censorship and counter-censorship, but also one of a number of discourses competing with each other for influence. Moreover, the Internet has

empowered not only the voices of regime critics, but those of a diverse range of actors, including the state and its supporters. The state is as much a producer and distributor of online content as the censor and repressor, particularly as it begins to embrace innovative propaganda tactics. Meanwhile, netizens are demonstrating diverse political orientations. According to the Chinese scholar Yonggang Li, certain state measures, such as the control of Internet cafés, actually enjoy popular support, which feeds into the state's agenda of content control.[3] Rightist and leftist netizens have been debating each other and have formed stable discursive communities.[4] Cyber-nationalists demonstrate pro-regime tendencies and inclinations to challenge the state's claims to nationalist legitimacy.[5] In a recent study, the communications scholar Min Jiang argues that both civil and uncivil discourses and behaviors co-exist in Chinese cyberspace, resulting in a coevolution of the Internet, uncivil society, and authoritarianism.[6] Such studies break with simplistic state-versus-society or censorship-versus-counter-censorship views of Internet governance, revealing a pluralized cyberspace of multiple public spheres in which various discourses compete with each other for the minds and hearts of netizens, rather than a terrain dominated by state-versus-society confrontation.[7]

While chapter 5 demonstrated how the Chinese Party-state uses astroturfing as a PR tactic to compete with (rather than simply censor and suppress) regime critics, this chapter further complicates the discourse competition perspective by examining how nonstate actors have attempted to engineer popular opinion online. In particular, by revealing how regime critics have ironically fed the popular imagination with the idea of national enemies conducting online sabotage against China, this chapter identifies a mechanism through which nationalist netizens and discourses become highly pro-regime in Chinese cyberspace. This mechanism helps explain the resilience of the Chinese authoritarian regime despite its clumsy efforts to control and shape online expression.

To map the complex dynamics of discourse competition among the diverse actors at the micro-level of cyber-activity, the following sections first explore the online opinion–engineering activities of dissidents and then focus on the rise of pro-regime voices. By highlighting the discursive construction of "national enemies," the chapter

illuminates the process of identity formation and discourse pluralization in Chinese cyberspace and explains why the erosion of state norms has yet to translate into support for regime critics or a normative transition to inclusive democracy.[8]

WEAPONS OF THE WEAK: POPULAR-OPINION ENGINEERING BY NONSTATE ACTORS

Online opinion manipulation tactics such as astroturfing were not invented by the state. In fact, BBS users were among the first to employ such trolling techniques, though seldom for political purposes.[9] In the early days of BBSs, when the top ten threads on the front page were selected and ranked according to the total number of participating accounts, trolling tactics were employed by users to help favored topics "hit the top ten" (*chong shida*, 冲十大). In addition to inviting friends to join, users employed multiple ghost accounts to fabricate a crowd.[10] As the Internet began to penetrate further into Chinese society, and as online expression gained increasing public influence,[11] more actors, including aggrieved petitioners and businesses,[12] began using astroturfing to garner attention, to attract media, and to put pressure on the authorities.[13] Popular platforms such as Tianya's "Free" board attracted so many petitioners that mutual competition sometimes drove users to create multiple accounts or recruit relatives and friends in order to "bump up threads" (*dingtie*, 顶帖).

Opinion manipulation tactics such as astroturfing and rumor-spreading are natural weapons for disadvantaged social groups like petitioners or dissidents who have few outlets for dissent in a repressive regime that controls most media resources.[14] In particular, compared with petitioners with specific grievances and limited goals, dissident groups challenging the legitimacy of the entire political system face an even harsher environment, forcing them to rely on low-profile, everyday forms of resistance. For instance, since the crackdown on Falun Gong, underground practitioners have been mobilizing through tactics like posting ads on telephone poles, writing slogans on paper currency notes, and secretly distributing newspapers and CDs.

With the Great Firewall filtering keywords and blocking suspicious IP addresses, dissidents must hide their identities to bypass state censorship. Meanwhile, many forums also muffle identifiable dissident voices to avoid state repercussions. For instance, Bdwm used to explicitly refuse reposts from Falun Gong sources such as the *Epoch Times*. Similarly, Mitbbs decided to eliminate Falun Gong materials from several boards in order to establish a legitimate mirror site for its domestic Chinese users in 2008. In addition to state and management censorship, dissidents sometimes suffer popular antipathy, making astroturfing a more effective option for them to promulgate their messages. For instance, Falun Gong sources were banned from Mitbbs's "ChinaNews" and "Military" boards by popular demand from users who believed that Falun Gong sources were not credible and were unhappy with Falun Gong practitioners who were flooding these boards with a huge number of posts.[15] Thus, astroturfing tactics protect dissidents' voices from state and management blacklisting, and from potential backlash from other netizens.

Dissident groups have spread their information through email spam and via online forums, as has been documented in a report by the global policy think tank RAND titled *You've Got Dissent*.[16] Falun Gong, for instance, is known for its online campaign efforts, and messages posted by Falun Gong practitioners often carry certain identifying characteristics. An email I received defaming Jiang Zemin, whose administration suppressed the spiritual group, serves as a good example.[17] The email claimed that Jiang had a messy private life and had even asked for sexual services during an official visit to Reno, Nevada, in the 1980s. Though users could not positively identify the sender's identity, the fact that the email was an attempt to defame Zemin points to Falun Gong.

Dissident attempts to delegitimize the regime can be indirect and nuanced. On December 1, 2010, an article titled "Alien Visits Earth: Astonishing Remarks from Martian Boy" was posted on "ChinaNews@Mitbbs," citing an alleged article from *Pravda*, the official newspaper of the Russian Communist Party, regarding a Russian boy who claimed to be a Martian. The post, written in an eschatological tone, claimed that the 2008 Sichuan earthquake was punishment for a "nation lacking belief," prophesied future catastrophes that would cause nearly one

million Chinese deaths, and claimed the Martian boy was on a mission to find a China-born "guiding spirit" for humankind. However, none of these points, many of which echo Falun Gong writings, can be found in the *Pravda* article. In addition, while the *Pravda* article was published as early as May 2008, the Chinese post did not start to flood the web until December 2010, with the earliest version found on Minghui.org, a Falun Gong website. Also, Google search results show that it was reposted widely on other Falun Gong websites. The post managed to penetrate popular domestic Chinese forums such as Kdnet, Kds (club.pchome.net), and Xcar (xcar.com). Many netizens suspected the post had Falun Gong origins.[18]

A widely circulated post comparing Chinese and U.S. government buildings provides another case of dissident astroturfing. The post juxtaposes extravagant Chinese city government buildings with austere U.S. city halls, conveying a clear and powerful message: Government agencies and officials in China prioritize their own comfort over the needs of the people. Though the message contains a kernel of truth, watchful netizens uncovered evidence of manipulation. Whereas the photographs of Chinese buildings were correctly identified, most of the photos of the U.S. buildings were distorted; some were simply fake, others were purposefully miniaturized, and still others were photographs from tiny cities with one thousand or so residents, not even as big as some Chinese villages.[19] Many netizens believed that the post was an astroturfing effort by democratic dissidents overseas.[20] Some believed that the same group also fabricated the widely circulated "Rand Opinions on the Chinese People," a falsified document circulated so widely online that Rand was forced to comment on the issue and disown the report. According to the Rand Corporation's official disclaimer, the fabricated report contains "extremely negative comments about Chinese people."[21]

Though it is hard to draw conclusions about the degree of planning behind these online tactics, these examples suggest highly purposeful attempts at evasion by dissidents. Overseas dissident groups, including those made up of Falun Gong practitioners, democratic activists, and people involved with the Tibet and Xinjiang independence movements, are widely believed to be the major actors behind such attempts. One

top executive of a major website interviewed for this study suggested that a subversive force was acting behind the scenes to manipulate online opinion.[22] Many other interviewees also commented they would not be surprised if this were true.

IMAGINED ENEMIES AND BACKLASH

Political astroturfing by dissident groups may have helped erode the regime's basis of legitimacy, but these efforts have also generated a backlash. For some netizens, the activities of online dissidents in fact bolster state propaganda identifying a handful of subversive forces, thus creating a counter-espionage atmosphere, at the heart of which is an imagined group of national enemies trying to sabotage China through online opinion manipulation. These enemies include both external hostile forces (especially Western powers) and internal subversive forces such as dissident groups, political and civil rights activists, pro-liberal media professionals, and intellectuals whose interests or values align with those of the external "enemies." It is believed that both the external and internal forces are actively engineering public opinion online in China, not for the good of the Chinese people or the nation as they claim, but for their own benefits or ulterior motives. Thus, their activities should be considered espionage, which patriotic netizens have the responsibility to disclose and counter. Often, the believability and transmission of such counter-espionage ideation is enhanced by netizens' online experiences.

Many Chinese harbor suspicions of Western countries and believe that if they are not conspiring to undermine China's rise, they are at least biased against China and its people.[23] These suspicions are often reinforced when they perceive Western interference with China's domestic affairs. For instance, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's involvement in the Google withdrawal case—including her dinner with representatives of IT giants such as Google and Twitter and her later statement on Internet freedom—effectively convinced many netizens that Google was a tool of the U.S. government, driving them to defend the Chinese government even though they disliked censorship.[24]

Similarly, the U.S. ambassador Jon Huntsman's presence at a Jasmine Revolution demonstration in Beijing in February 2011 was taken as evidence of U.S. attempts to destabilize China.[25] And his remarks about reaching out to allies and constituencies within China to "take China down" immediately caught fire among netizens and were thought to be a declaration of America's hostile intentions.[26]

Similarly, Chinese nationalism is often spurred by perceived biases in Western media. A series of events in 2008 is particularly revealing. During the Lhasa riot in March 2008,[27] Rao Jin, a Tsinghua University graduate and NewSmth user, set up a special platform called Anti-CNN.com,[28] which compiled screenshots of distorted Western media coverage of the riot. Such distortions included videos and photos of Nepalese and Indian police forces said to be Chinese police in Lhasa,[29] cropping photos to misguide readers,[30] mistaking rescue efforts as suppression,[31] and other direct manipulations of online opinion.[32] These reports assisted Chinese netizens in "[imagining] the Western world as a collective that has shared perceptions, shared distortions and shared biases towards China," as the Chinese public intellectual Liang Wendao put it.[33] The following poem by an anonymous author, written in response to the Western media coverage of the 2008 Lhasa riot, demonstrates how a particular event may trigger and amplify Chinese netizens' anger toward the West:[34]

WHAT DO YOU REALLY WANT FROM US

When we were the Sick Man of Asia,
We were called the Yellow Peril.
When we are billed as the next Superpower, we are called The Threat.
When we closed our doors, you launched the Opium War to open our markets.
When we embraced free trade, you blamed us for stealing your jobs.
When we were falling apart, you marched in your troops and demanded your fair share.
When we tried to put the broken pieces back together again,
Free Tibet, you screamed. It was an Invasion!
When we tried communism, you hated us for being communist.

When we embraced capitalism, you hated us for being capitalist.
When we had a billion people, you said we were destroying the planet.
When we tried limiting our numbers, you said we abused human rights.
When we were poor, you thought we were dogs.
When we lend you cash, you blame us for your national debts.
When we build our industries, you call us polluters.
When we sell you goods, you blame us for global warming.
When we buy oil, you call it exploitation and genocide.
When you go to war for oil, you call it liberation.
When we were lost in chaos, you demanded the rule of law.
When we uphold law and order against violence, you call it a violation of human rights.
When we were silent, you said you wanted us to have free speech.
When we are silent no more, you say we are brainwashed xenophobes.
Why do you hate us so much? We asked.
No, you answered, we don't hate you.
We don't hate you either,
But do you understand us?
Of course we do, you said,
We have AFP, CNN and BBC. . .
What do you really want from us?
Think hard first, then answer . . .
Because you only get so many chances.
Enough is Enough, Enough Hypocrisy for This One World.
We want One World, One Dream, and Peace on Earth.
This Big Blue Earth is Big Enough for all of Us.

During these incidents, netizens not only criticized reports from the Western media, but also mobilized to reach out and persuade Western audiences. One Mitbbs user posted a long summary of Australian high school English teacher Mark A. Jones's debate with a pro-Tibet lobbyist as an example of how to effectively communicate with and win over Westerners.[35] A number of similar posts were circulated on Chinese forums such as Mitbbs, NewSmth, and Tianya to facilitate the spread of China's voices. Such efforts took on an even bigger role than the state propaganda machine in publicly defending China's policy in Tibet

because of the popularity of the posts and because such posts are not products of the state propaganda machine. In addition, these netizens demonstrated that coverage by Western media can generate considerable backlash, sometimes mobilizing Chinese netizens against the West more effectively than the Chinese state.

Also in 2008, not long after the Lhasa riot, Chinese netizens rallied patriotically during the Olympic torch relay. To show support for the nation, Mitbbs users even donated airfare for those flying from other areas to San Francisco to follow the torch on its U.S. leg.[36] There, they were irritated to find that protesters received far more media coverage than the far larger crowds who gathered in support of China. Furthermore, the CNN commentator and host Jack Cafferty's careless comment—"I think they're basically the same bunch of goons and thugs they've been for the last fifty years"—further infuriated Chinese netizens, who cited his remark as another manifestation of the Western media's stubborn anti-Chinese bias.[37]

In addition to the West, major dissident groups are also commonly portrayed as enemies of the nation or surrogates for hostile foreign powers. Accounts of dissident groups engineering online public opinion are perceived by many netizens as interfering with China's development, thus justifying counter-dissident efforts on the part of both netizens and the regime, even censorship. In fact, the popular perception that democratic activists, Falun Gong practitioners, and separatists (including those involved in the Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang independence movements) are part of a joint force coordinated by the United States and other Western powers is widespread. Rumors about Wang Dan (a student leader in the 1989 Tiananmen Square democratic movement) receiving funds from the independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party administration in Taiwan are frequently cited as evidence of democratic activists colluding with separatist movements.[38] Furthermore, the awarding of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo generated similar backlash among nationalistic netizens. The Noble laureate was accused of "taking money from the National Endowment of Democracy," supporting the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and demeaning China by making statements like "It would take three hundred years of colonization for China to become what Hong Kong is today."[39]

The perception of online dissidence as a threat to national interests has soured many netizens on the democratization movement that sprung up in the 1980s. Democratic activists are perceived as being manipulated by external hostile forces, and nationalistic netizens blame them for being too stubborn to compromise in 1989, for leaving fellow students behind while fleeing Tiananmen, and for escaping the bloody crackdown in China to live an easy life overseas. Such perceptions, in combination with factional struggles within the democratic movement, have convinced many netizens that the type of democracy advocated by these activists is not a viable alternative to the Chinese Communist Party.[40]

This legacy became evident during the 2011 pro-democracy "Jasmine Revolution" protests in China. When the democratic activist Wang Juntao posted a tweet urging well-known democratic activists to stay at home to avoid repression,[41] he triggered a wave of jeers aimed at democratic activists. Ranxiang, a popular microblogger on Weibo who calls herself the "Chair of the Fifty-Cent Party,"[42] posted a series of satirical entries, including the following, which were then retweeted by fellow microbloggers and widely circulated in major forums[43]:

> Let democratic elites go first, and you should hide behind them.[44]
>
> Most democratic elites have enjoyed the fruits of China's reform and opening-up and led a good life, so they should be on the forefront and die for their cause; we common people haven't had enough good days and cannot die now. What's more, your death is different from an elite's death: yours is as light as a swan feather, and theirs is as weighty as Mount Tai.[45]

These passages depict democratic activists as cowards who have been selfishly risking the lives of ordinary citizens for their own agenda. This reminds many netizens of Chai Ling, one of the most noted student leaders of the 1989 Tiananmen movement, who said "You, the Chinese! You are not worth my struggle! You are not worth my sacrifice!"[46]

It is not just dissident groups who are constructed as internal enemies, however. Pro-democracy liberal intellectuals, opinion leaders,

and media professionals are also lumped together as "elites" (*jingying*, 精英) and "universalists" (*pushipai*, 普世派), or sometimes as "universal elites" (*pushi jingying*, 普世精英).[47] For instance,

> I admire the young people for their courage in pursuing democracy. But in case bloody revolution happens, you must remember that your life is most important. Don't trust those *elites* who talk about liberty above everything . . . . Those with the most adamant revolutionary will like *Zhang Ming*, *Li Chengpeng*, *Huang Jianxiang*, *Xia Yeliang*, *Tufu*, *Zhan Jiang*, and *Sanren* should be on the forefront. If they are not, you should try all means to bring them to the forefront and use them as human shields.[48]

The "elites" listed here are all public intellectuals, media professionals, or opinion leaders known for their "universalist" stance. Given their influence on online public opinion, some netizens are justifiably wary about their motivations. For instance, during the Arab Spring, the popular playwright and microblog celebrity Ning Caishen posted a Weibo entry reporting that his friends were stuck in Cairo, Egypt, owing to a slow and inefficient evacuation by the Chinese embassy. The message was retweeted over twenty-eight thousand times before it was deleted by Ning himself, recognizing that the situation was not entirely the embassy's fault. However, his corrective tweet to clarify his overreaction and acknowledge the embassy's work, which was posted just three hours after his first tweet, was retweeted only 491 times in three weeks.[49] This contrast not only shows how criticism of the government easily becomes viral and thus difficult to neutralize, but also convinces many that an "invisible hand" (*mushou heishou*, 幕后黑手) is manipulating online opinion for subversive purposes.[50] In another case, three individuals, Li Chengpeng, Zhang Ming, and Huang Jianxiang, retweeted a Weibo post claiming that a government corruption case involving $25,000 was the biggest in U.S. history (in contrast to corruption cases in China involving much greater sums). Li's retweet alone was subsequently retweeted close to three thousand times by his followers in about a week, few of whom doubted the claim.[51] But critical netizens, while acknowledging China's corruption problem,

correctly cast doubt on the figure and also took the tweet as evidence of opinion leaders irresponsibly inciting anti-government sentiment by overstating the honesty of U.S. officials.[52]

Many netizens also believe that pro-liberal media groups such as the Southern Clique (*Nanfang Xi*, 南方系) are motivated by a clandestine agenda.[53] Named after the outspoken Southern Media Group, known for its investigative journalism and pro-liberal standpoint,[54] the Southern Clique is a loose grouping of media outlets and professionals either currently or formerly affiliated with the Southern Media Group. A former *Southern Metropolis Daily (Nanfang Dushibao*, 南方都市报*)* reporter confirmed the group's tendency to report on "issues related to the public interest, especially government misbehavior."[55] The Southern Clique's critical stance is a major part of its reputation, and the group is well respected among many readers. Yet it also invites criticism from both nationalists and politically neutral netizens suspicious of any attempt to guide public opinion. In fact, the Southern Clique is frequently charged online with "smuggling in its own values and beliefs in reports" and "brainwashing" the public.[56] The following blog entry by Liu Yuan—who used to work at *Southern Metropolis Daily* and was editor in chief of *South Morning Post (Nanguo Zaobao*, 南国早报)—boasting of the influence of the Southern Media Group only validates netizens' belief that the group is engaged in a subversive conspiracy:

> Southern Group's contribution is not limited to the newspapers it directly operates. It has educated countless people who worked there and influenced peer media professionals. When it and *China Youth Daily* become role models, their values are embraced by numerous media professionals. . . .
>
> The Internet provides the most freedom of expression. But interestingly, left voices are rare on major portals, except Sina. . . .
>
> I told my friends, among the four major portals, QQ's editor in chief, Chen Juhong, was from *Southern Weekend* [*Nanfang Zhoumo*, 南方周末]; Sohu's Zhao Mu, who runs the blog sector, was from *Southern Weekend*, and Liu Xinzheng was from the *Beijing News*

> [*Xin Jingbao*, 新京报; cofounded by *Guangming Daily* and the Nanfang Group]; Sina has many old friends from *Southern Metropolis Daily* and the *Beijing News*, not to mention *Netease*, whose vice-president, editor in chief, deputy editor in chief, chief inspector, and almost all managing channel editors were from the Southern Group. . . .
>
> No doubt, they play a big role in clamping down extreme nationalism. Pitiful leftists can only curse in their or others' blogs in vain. Internet gurus know that a rational, portal-recommended post would be more influential than ten thousand follow-up, cursing, leftist posts.[57]

For many netizens, self-identified liberals such as Liu Yuan are not practicing freedom of expression. Instead, they are merely trying to establish their own dominance in online expression. And to achieve this goal, they are more than willing to suppress different voices with managerial power. A widely circulated online image demonstrates how some netizens ridicule the pro-liberal media's disdain for nonliberal viewpoints. The image includes the logos of three perceived pro-liberal media outlets: *Southern Weekend*, Netease, and Kdnet. Under each logo is a mission statement for the particular media platform. They read, "We do not allow you to say anything bad about the U.S.!" (*Southern Weekend*); "We do not allow you to say anything good about China!" (Netease); and "We are discussing democracy, and we do not allow you to say anything!" (Kdnet.net).[58]

Such negative views of the pro-liberal media are only reinforced when reports contain misleading factual errors. For instance, after the Polish president's plane crashed in April 2010, QQ (which is popularly believed to be part of the Southern Clique) praised the frugality of the Polish government for owning just one plane. This detail immediately caught netizens' attention, and online accusations of extravagance and waste in Chinese government spending followed. Suspicious fact-checkers, however, soon found that Poland actually has six planes (two Tu-154s and four Yak-40s) and a number of helicopters for its leaders. Once fact-checkers publicized these errors, netizens accused the Southern Clique of deliberately manipulating public opinion to serve its own interests or of at least being blinded by its predispositions.[59]

The social construction of enemies through online discourse evokes strong emotions. When *Southern Weekend* was the only media outlet granted an interview with President Obama during his 2009 visit to China, nationalistic netizens perceived this as a reward for American "agents." When the interview was printed, *Southern Weekend* left the bottom half of its front page blank (*kai tianchuang*, 开天窗) under the Obama interview as a protest against state censorship. The action, while applauded by pro-liberal netizens, was viewed by their nationalistic counterparts as a public humiliation, defaming China by begging for foreign intervention in domestic Chinese affairs.[60] Similarly, online discourse surrounding the case of Yao Jiaxin, who was executed for the stabbing death of a woman following a hit-and-run, strengthened netizens' perception of a pro-Western media. The victim's lawyer posted a microblog entry claiming that a Southern Clique journalist had tried to dissuade him from pursuing the death penalty for Yao in order to promote the abolition of the death penalty in China. Numerous netizens subsequently became incensed at what they perceived as the pro-liberal media being infiltrated by "pussy" (yes, they used the English word, which has a similar pronunciation to the Chinese word for *universalism*: *pushi*, 普世) Western values that are sympathetic to killers but not victims.[61]

TWO TALES: A MULTIPLAYER MODEL OF ONLINE DISCOURSE COMPETITION

Online PR practices like astroturfing by both the state and its challengers have exacerbated confusion and distrust among netizens. On one hand, as discussed in chapter 5, many netizens are wary of state PR efforts to cover up failures and manipulate public opinion. In this framing, online discourse competition can be viewed as a story of netizens defending their freedoms against state censorship and manipulation. On the other hand, the discussion in this chapter illustrates the popular suspicion of mass opinion–engineering efforts by dissident groups and other regime challengers. This framing promotes a view of online discourse competition between pro-state and anti-state actors. Each

viewpoint presents a distinctive perspective. Netizens either see themselves as freedom-loving fighters—allied to a degree with dissidents, other suppressed domestic actors, and foreign powers pushing for China's liberalization and democratization—struggling against state agents and brainwashed regime-defenders, or as patriots allied with the state against subversive actors, including netizens "brainwashed" by a pro-liberal media bias.

In anonymous online expression, both framings reveal anxiety about the political stance and true identity of others netizens. Widespread labeling wars—netizen groups attacking each other with derogatory labels—demonstrate these anxieties. Binary "us-versus-them" labels, as shown in table 6.1, reflect competing framings of online discourse without clearly defined or self-conscious group identities.

These labels often intentionally carry negative and even highly offensive connotations. For instance, in place of the Chinese character 愤 (angry) for "angry youth," its homonym, 粪 (shit), is often used. Similarly, the word "pussy" is often used to refer to universalism and universalists because the English pronunciation of the word is similar to that of the Chinese term 普世. These labeling confrontations often

TABLE 6.1 Labels and Labeling Wars

Two Dominant Framings in Online Political Expression in China

The Struggle-for-Freedom Tale		The Counterespionage Tale
Fifty-cent army (*wumao dang*, 五毛党)	vs.	Net spies (*wangte*, 网特; foreign agents) U.S. cents (*meifen dang*, 美分党) Road-leading party (*dailu dang*, 带路党) Dog food party (*gouliang dang*, 狗粮党)
Angry youth (*fengqin*, 愤青)	vs.	Elites (*jingying*, 精英)
Patriotic traitor (*aiguo zei*, 爱国贼)	vs.	Universalists (*pushipai*, 普世派) Western slaves (*xinu*, 西奴)
Little red guards (*xiaojiang*, 小将)	vs.	Old generals (*laojiang*, 老将)

serve only to reinforce netizens' existing biases and thus trap both sides into identities from which they are incapable of escaping. This devolution of labeling wars into conflicts between opposing parties comes up again in the next chapter when we will look more closely at the "voluntary fifty-cent army."

It is worth noting that these denigrating labels sometimes are reinterpreted differently and even internalized by the victims of the labeling war. For instance, the "road-leading party" (*dailu dang*, 带路党; the term literally means people that lead the way for invaders; it is used by nationalist netizens as an equivalent to betrayers of the nation) is depicted positively in an online image of a peasant giving directions to a United Nations (UN) solider.[62] The individual pictured has an honest face and invokes the image of an elderly farmer willingly assisting Chinese soldiers during China's anti-Japanese War. Behind the farmer and the UN solider is a flag, on which is written, "Leading the way [for foreign intervention] is glorious" and "Liberate China." It appears that the graph is meant to convey a more sympathetic than critical image of the road-leading party, which believes that China needs to be liberated again, possibly through foreign intervention.

The appendix provides an example of a dialogue typical of a labeling war, with the users anonymized. The thread, captured from Mitbbs, was initiated by "X18," a Xiaojiang (小将, "little red guard," often referring to pro-Chinese government users) user deriding Falun Gong practitioners ("wheels") for failing to seek political asylum status after destroying their Chinese passports upon arrival in the United States. In a condescending tone, he mocked these people because the United States had denied their appeal for political asylum and the Chinese government had refused to reissue them Chinese passports. "LBK," a Laojiang (老将, "old general," users that are against the Chinese government and the Party) user known for his anti-Party stance, replied immediately, jeering that XI8 might end up practicing Falun Gong in order to stay in the United States because he had not found a job yet—rather than a factual claim, such an accusation was meant to demean X18 as a jobless loser. XI8's follow-up reply showed that he actually had got a job and implied that LBK was a traitor and a loser by labeling him as an agent of the National Endowment for Democracy, which is

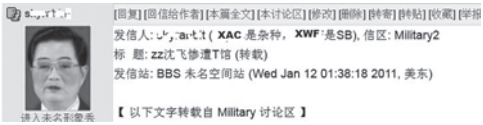

FIGURE 6.1 Avatar of an MITBBS User.

Source: mitbbs.com. Usernames are redacted to protect privacy of the users.

often perceived by nationalist netizens as a proxy of the United States government to subvert other countries. In return, LBK charged XI8 with being a Party-state proxy. As more users became involved, the discussion quickly devolved into attacks between Xiaojiang and Laojiang users blaming each other for being cheap, trashy, and selling their souls to either the Party-state or foreign enemies.

This kind of mutual antagonism sometimes escalates. For instance, a Laojiang user—whose political inclination is clear from his posts as well as his avatar (an uglified image of then president Hu Jintao; figure 6.1)—showed his hatred toward two Xiaojiang users, "XAC" and "XWF," by nicknaming himself "XAC is a bastard and XWF is a son of a bitch." Such hatred sometimes drives personal attacks to a vitriolic level; for example, an alleged Laojiang cursed some Xiaojiang users from Mitbbs and another overseas Chinese forum, 6park.com (implying that he was active on both forums), by creating an online graveyard. And on each gravestone was written, "The grave of the son-of-a-bitch fifty-cent dog XXX@YYY [ID@forum]'s stinky bitch mother, who died of AIDS." Below that was the national flag of the People's Republic of China with the stars replaced by the Chinese character "Mao" (毛) to symbolize the fifty-cent army. And on the left and right sides of the gravestone was text reading, "Listen to the Party, serve as the Party's dog, and pretend to be a human and yell out," and "Bite whoever the Party wants you to bite, and bite as many times as ordered."[63]

In contrast, like-minded users interact much more amicably among themselves, for purposes of both exchanging ideas and performative expression. Sharing similar values and opinions, these users sometimes ridicule discussions like cross-talk masters chiming back and forth to each other. Again, let's take the labeling war presented

in the appendix as an example. "XWF" asked whether unsuccessful Falun Gong asylum-seekers without valid passports might have to stay underground for their entire lives. Another user, "XWR," quickly replied that he shouldn't worry because the U.S. government respects human rights. XWF then asks, "Won't illegal immigrants be thrown in jail?" XWR then explained his logic: Yes, illegal immigrants would be thrown in jail, but food and accommodation would be provided, thus demonstrating U.S. human rights. This dialogue clearly distorts the concept of human rights and makes little sense, unless viewed as purposeful performative behavior through which a common identity is strengthened and rival netizens are mocked.

There are two different framings reflected in labeling wars. In Xiaojiang users' eyes, the Laojiang group comprises democratic activists, Falun Gong practitioners, and traitors, as well as their supporters.[64] For Laojiang users, Xiaojiang users are either members of the fifty-cent army or angry youth brainwashed by the Chinese state. Laojiang users on Mitbbs have even created a list of those they accuse of being part of the fifty-cent army, most of whom are Xiaojiang. Similarly, Xiaojiang users have identified a list of "China-betrayers" (*hanjian*, 汉奸). The confrontation spills over into the struggle for forum management: Mitbbs managers of the "ChinaNews" and "Military" boards are frequently criticized for taking one side and suppressing the other.[65]

Although the examples presented here are primarily from Mitbbs, similar phenomena occur on almost all major forums both inside and outside China, to varying degrees and with variations in the labels used.[66] However, whatever labels are deployed, the same dyadic pattern holds: Netizens on both sides, either intentionally or unintentionally, seek moral positionality in a binary framework by claiming they are speaking for the people, or on behalf of the truth, and blaming the other side for immorality, insincerity, or serving as either state or foreign agents. Given the different framings, netizens often resort to distinctive norms and facts in their debates, thus making online discussion unconstructive, with netizens primarily speaking with like-minded others rather than interacting constructively across opposing frameworks.[67]

The two framings analyzed here complicate the story of discourse competition in Chinese cyberspace beyond the narrative of social

norms challenging Party-state norms. As the next section demonstrates, a complex and dynamic process of persuasion and dissuasion involving multiple actors with diverse beliefs, values, and identities permeates both framings, resulting in intriguing and sometimes unexpected implications for discourse competition.

COMPLICATIONS WITH THE MULTIPLAYER MODEL

The 2011 Japanese earthquake provides a chance to examine the complicated mechanisms at work in online discourse competition. After the quake, Chinese nationalism and anti-Japanese sentiment were stimulated by Japanese netizens, whose cynical reactions to China's assistance were translated and widely circulated on Chinese forums.[68] This was unexpected by a number of actors, including the governments and many netizens from both countries.[69] Chinese netizens were obviously not the intended audience when Japanese netizens expressed their views. Yet, the whole process traces back to a chain reaction that actually began much earlier when the Chinese media projected a largely negative image of China to its domestic audience, which then spread overseas. In fact, terms used by Japanese netizens, such as "poisonous milk powder" (*du naifen*, 毒奶粉) and "paper-filled buns" (*zhi baozi*, 纸包子), were all first disclosed by the Chinese media. This image reinforced Japanese netizens' already negative impression of China owing to longstanding historical animosity and territorial disputes. So when the Chinese responded to the Japanese earthquake and tsunami with good intentions,[70] some Japanese netizens revealed their distrust, which then was translated into Chinese and circulated in Chinese cyberspace. The contrast between the good intentions of the Chinese and hostility from the Japanese reinforced the image of an ungrateful Japan, reminding Chinese netizens of unpleasant historical experiences.[71] Through such complicated multi-actor dynamics, the impression of external hostility was strengthened, adding credibility to the counter-espionage narrative.

Interestingly, both the freedom-struggle and counter-espionage framings may backfire, further complicating the model. The mixed responses of Chinese netizens to Google's withdrawal from the country

provide a good example of this. Though many framed the withdrawal as a counter-espionage story by imagining the company as a tool of the U.S. government,[72] netizens in general were divided on the issue. When one Ccthere user ("User A"), a website developer, expressed his sympathy for Google and dissatisfaction with state censorship, he was immediately criticized for being hijacked by Google:

> . . . This shows that "doggy" (a slighting homophone of "Google") has already abducted some of our nationals. No wonder "doggy" feels confident enough to challenge *tugong* [土工, a pet name for the Chinese Communist Party]. Mrs. Clinton is now taking charge, and "doggy" cannot quit the game now. Propping up compradors, cultivating elites, and hijacking public opinion, imperialist America has numerous means and is indeed the number-one empire.[73]

Infuriated, User A replied,

> Alright! I am a comprador. I am elite. I am a fifth-column agent planted in China by imperialists. I am the gun used by others. I have been manipulated and abducted. I should not have spoken my grievances because behind me stands imperialism. I should not have raised opinions toward website management because I am fooled, brainwashed, with my mind full of institutions and rules. . . . For small potatoes in the country like me, does it mean I am manipulated and attempt to attack the government when I talk about housing demolition? Does it mean I side with Western environmental fascists and attempt to attack the government when I talk about environmental protection? Does it mean I bind myself with American imperialists and attempt to attack the government when I talk about Internet governance and sympathize with Google? Does it mean I attempt to stimulate riots, create trouble, and point the spear toward the government when I sympathize with petitioning masses? Standing on the commanding heights of "For the rise of China" and criticizing others is easy. Others are deceived or manipulated, if not driven by bad intentions. . . . Please don't categorize me as being manipulated, abducted, or ignorant. I have my own judgment and thoughts.[74]

While the counter-espionage framing may persuade some netizens to adopt a nationalistic stance, User A's response demonstrates that such an approach may backfire: when one is portrayed as an enemy, one might get irritated and fight back. Clearly, User A's background as a web developer mattered.[75] Google not only provides services that benefit Internet users, but also has been a role model for IT professionals: Its decision to withdraw from China and the slogan "Do no evil" are shining symbols against state censorship and repression. Meanwhile, what discouraged netizens from further nationalistic mobilization were widespread rumors about how baidu.com, the Chinese search engine giant, gained market share through unfair competition and cooperation with regime censorship objectives.

CONCLUSION

This chapter demonstrates how regime critics, such as Western powers, dissident groups, and even pro-liberal intellectuals and media professionals, can suffer from a loss of credibility, just as the state can, in online discourse competition. Though the perception of regime critics as national enemies conducting online espionage by many netizens may be unfair, erroneous, or based on stereotypes, some netizens believe that a counter-espionage framing of their opponents has merit or at least makes more sense than a framing of a struggle for freedom. For these netizens, the paramount task is to defend China against these hostile forces rather than to fight for civil liberties or democracy.

The analysis in this chapter shows that online discourse competition in China is much more complicated than what Lagerkvist depicts as the state and the society interacting with an "uneasy social contract on control and freedom."[76] Thus, netizens' support of the regime is not merely a result of their deference to authoritarian rule or about seeking psychological coherence for the current political status quo. Rather, it represents a coherent and solid logic: They support a pro-state discourse not because the state is doing well, but because regime critics are not trustworthy and have failed to live up to their expectations.[77] For many netizens who buy into the counter-espionage framing, the

Chinese Party-state is a necessary evil for defending national interests and delivering prosperity.

To a large extent, imagining enemies is a process through which netizens form fragmented and unsystematic pieces of information into a stereotype. This is often done in a collective manner through interactions among like-minded netizens who echo and reinforce each other's views in online discussions. These like-minded netizens tend to form stable online communities in which they share common values, adopt a uniform behavioral code, and interact to sustain a preferred discourse.[78] Through repeated interactions with comrades, a common memory of online experiences is constructed, and collective identity is strengthened.

The next chapter examines the formation and maintenance of online communities by focusing on the so-called voluntary fifty-cent army, a group that claims to defend the regime on a voluntary basis. While this chapter emphasizes the process of netizens constructing a counter-espionage framing to make sense of discourse competition, chapter 7's study of the voluntary fifty-cent army highlights the group's identity formation, community building, and discourse production through daily interactions among themselves and against imagined enemies.