Demobilizing the Emotions of Online Activism in China:
A Civilizing Process

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With the declining number of Internet protest events in recent years, online activism in China has suffered a setback. This is due significantly to the implementation of new forms of governing online expression. At the center of these new forms is a set of discourses of *wenming*, the Chinese characters for which can be translated as both "civilization" and "civility." As *civilization*, *wenming* operates as an ideological discourse of legitimation, whereas as *civility*, *wenming* functions as a strategic technology for Internet governance. After tracing the evolution of the ideological discourse of *wenming*, this article analyzes the technologies of civility used for managing online speech in China. Two case studies illustrate how the technologies of civility are used to demobilize the emotions of online protest.

Keywords: online activism, emotion, censorship, Internet, civility, civilization, China

Emotions accompany and condition collective action and social movements. Their absence or presence, and their types and intensities, underpins every phase of a social movement from emergence to decline (Collins, 2004; Flam & King, 2005; Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2000; Jasper, 1998; G. Yang, 2000). This is true not only of traditional social movement activities in the streets but also of new types of activism and mobilization online. Castells (2012) argues that online social networks function as "permanent forums of solidarity" for contemporary protest movements. He locates the critical moment of movement emergence in the "emotional activation" of the collective, when individuals recognize the shared quality of their sentiments and decide to act upon them. Shaw (2014) argues that blogs enable women to convey anger at injustice in ways that are prohibited in daily life. The verbal and emotional silencing of women in the social world finds its reverse image in the habitual articulation of indignation by women on digital platforms. Papacharissi (2014) shows the rise of affective publics when affective news streams on Twitter during the Egyptian protests in 2011 created a drama of instantaneity and emotional

ambience for networked publics. Clark's (2016) study of American feminist hashtag activism highlights the role of emotional narratives in producing the social drama of online activism.

Emotional mobilization is as central to online activism in China as elsewhere. The numerous Internet protest events in China are the result of passionate participation and emotional expression. They depend on symbolic forms and content that induce strong emotions among the online public. Especially important in these processes of online mobilization are emotions of sympathy and playfulness (G. Yang, 2009) and anger (J. L. Xie, 2012). It is often out of anger at police brutality and sympathy for victims of social injustice that many Chinese netizens voice their outrage and indignation online, whereas protests of government authorities often take the form of humor, play, and satire (Bian & Gao, 2012; H. Gong & Yang, 2010; Jiao, 2014).

Frequent Internet protests are cause for grave concern to a political regime that has made "stability maintenance" a policy priority (Y. Xie, 2012). To curtail online contention, the Chinese government has shaped up a complex system of architectures, institutions, and practices of Internet censorship and governance (Han, 2015; King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013; Kluver, 2005; MacKinnon, 2008; Tsui, 2003). Yet for a long time, this system did not effectively roll back online activism.

In recent years, however, China's Internet censorship regime has been refined in response to changing forms and platforms of online expression. Government authorities no longer use only coercive methods to block and filter content or to harass dissidents, but they have also embraced proactive and preventive methods to inhibit critical speech and actively produce "positive energy" online, that is, speech that is supportive of government agendas. At the center of these new forms of censorship is a set of discourses of civility and civilization (*wenming*). These discourses are used to demobilize online activism by attacking its emotional and allegedly irrational character. Negative emotions that are especially powerful in social protests, such as anger, indignation, and hatred (Jasper, 1998), are attacked in the name of civility and reason. It is imperative, therefore, to analyze the new discourses of civility to fully understand the changing landscape of online activism and Internet governance in China.

The Chinese term *wenming* may be translated as both "civilization" and "civility." Indeed, in the new discursive formation built on this concept, it means both. As *civilization*, *wenming* operates as an ideological discourse that legitimates the governance and administration of society. As *civility*, it functions as a strategic technology and tool for governance and self-governance, including the governance of the Internet. After tracing the evolution of the *wenming* discourse as an ideology in contemporary China, I analyze the technologies of civility used for managing online speech and illustrate my arguments with two case studies.

In analyzing the uses of civilization and civility for censorship, I do not imply that there is no uncivil behavior in Chinese cyberspaces or that online civility is undesirable. Incivility is common (Jiang, 2016), and it is this condition of incivility that turns many Chinese citizens into supporters of the official discourses of civility, thus enhancing the legitimacy of the official discourse. Furthermore, although the language of *wenming* has a Chinese history and political context, the discourses of civility and civilization have a longer and global history associated with nation building, colonialism, and the development of the

modern individual (Duara, 2001; Elias, 1939/2000; G. W. Gong, 1984). And as Calabrese (2015) argues, appeals to civility to silence dissenting expression about matters of social justice can also be "liberalism's disease."

Online Activism and Emotional Demobilization

I use the concept of online activism to refer to contentious Internet events (Jiang, 2015) that take place online—whether on social media platforms or mobile phones. In this sense, it is similar to what Bennett and Segerberg (2013) refer to as online connective action, or what Shaw (2014) and Clark (2016) refer to as discursive activism. Emotional expressions are central to all these varieties of online activism. The emotions in them may be "outrage and hope" (Castells, 2012), "play and sympathy" (G. Yang, 2009), or anger (J. L. Xie, 2012). In Chinese-language discourse, cases of online activism are sometimes called "Internet mass incidents." A label with negative connotations, "Internet mass incidents" are to be closely monitored, managed, and controlled because they are deemed irrational and destabilizing (Huang, 2010).

Given the centrality of emotions, it is not surprising that recent Chinese government efforts to manage and neutralize online activism have aimed to demobilize emotions, especially such negative emotions as anger and indignation. Internet censorship in China has been practiced since the mid-1990s when the Internet began to catch on. Yet until recent years, censorship efforts have largely failed to contain China's contentious and wild Web (Herold & Marolt, 2012). Since 2013, however, although Internet protests continue to appear, they are not as frequent as before. Surveys by Chinese Internet research and monitoring institutions (*People's Daily Online*, 2015, July 10; Shanghai Jiaotong University, 2015) show that the overall number of online incidents has declined while the number of online events with "positive" public sentiments —or supportive of government agendas—has increased (Y. G. Xie, 2014). Online opinion survey reports produced by *People's Daily Online* (2014, March 18) attribute this change to the new strategy of "combining hard with soft power" (Part 1, para. 1) in governing the Web. The "soft" aspect of this new strategy is the mobilization of discourses of civility and civilization to undermine online emotional expressions, a process of what I refer to as civilizing the Web. Before I examine this civilizing process, a brief discussion of speech censorship is in order.

A More Expansive Approach to Speech Censorship

Writing about the history of censorship, Rosenfeld (2001) notes that

> in the realm of theory, there seems no longer to be any consensus about what censorship is; both its characteristic forms and identifying markers have become subjects of dispute in courtrooms and classrooms alike, especially as a result of poststructuralist critiques of its binary relation to free speech. (p. 117)

It is from out of these critiques that a "new censorship theory" has emerged. Proponents of this "new censorship theory," as Müller (2004) puts it,

> have advocated a view of censorship much broader than the traditional one by insisting
> that apart from institutionalized, interventionist ("regulatory") censorship, social

> interaction and communication is affected by "constitutive," or "structural" censorship: forms of discourse regulation which influence what can be said by whom, to whom, how, and in which context. (p. 1)

Bunn (2015) suggests that the new censorship theory

> may ultimately turn out that effective authoritative censorship is not simply external, but insinuates itself into the circuits of communication, not simply coercive but also mobilizes powerful social currents, not simply repressive but also generates new forms of speech and thought. (p. 43)

Insights from the new censorship theory can shed light on the changing forms of Internet governance in China. However, the dominance of the party-state in China means that these insights must be combined with the liberal view of repressive state censorship to make full sense of Chinese realities. The liberal view that the state acts as an external and coercive force to restrict speech freedom remains highly relevant to censorship practices in contemporary China. This view is inadequate on its own, however, because it fails to capture those features highlighted in the new censorship theory.

Cognizant of the deficiencies of a narrowly liberal view of censorship, recent scholarship has begun to probe into the complexities of Internet censorship in China by analyzing subtler changes in Internet governance and ambivalent attitudes to censorship (Esarey, 2015; Han, 2015; Schlaeger & Jiang, 2014; Taneja & Wu, 2014; F. Yang, 2014). One new feature is that censorship is not always prohibitive; it can also be productive. For example, a study of the censorship of the Internet novel *Such Is This World@sars.com* shows that roadblocks of censorship "resulted neither in dead-ends nor so much in detours as in diffusion. Not only did the novel stay alive but multiple lives were engendered" (Chen, 2015, p. 27).

Another new feature is that the agents of censorship are no longer confined to the state but also include civil society and other nonstate actors. The combination of coercive and noncoercive methods of censorship and the expansion of the agents of censorship beyond state bureaucracies—a hybrid view of Internet censorship—is well captured in the Chinese phrase *gang rou xiang ji*—the fusion of hard and soft power, which is precisely the name of the new strategy that has been touted in official Chinese media about Internet governance in recent years (*People's Daily Online*, 2015, July 10).

The Ideological Discourse of Civilization in China

The linchpin of the soft strategy in Internet governance is *wenming*, a concept that can be translated as both "civility" and "civilization." As *civilization*, *wenming* operates as an overarching ideological discourse. As *civility*, it serves as a strategic tool for governance and control. This conceptualization overcomes the difficulties in the debates about whether civility should be viewed as norms or as a political tool (Herbst, 2010). My argument is that it operates as both, but does so at two different levels.

Discourses about civility and civilization have been integral to Chinese modernity since the late 19th century (Duara, 2001; Kipnis, 2006; Litzinger, 2000). As historian Ann Anagnost (1997) puts it, "Influenced by the reforms of Meiji Japan as well as by a Marxist theory of historical stages, Chinese intellectuals and officials throughout the twentieth century have advocated civilization (*wenming*) as a national strategy for radical social transformation" (pp. 81–82). As a measure of modernity, *wenming* means being modern, having culture, and having good manners and polite behavior. It resembles the idea of civilization in Western modernity analyzed by Norbert Elias (1939/2000):

> The concept of "civilization" refers to a wide variety of facts: to the level of technology, to the type of manners, to the development of scientific knowledge, to religious ideas and customs. It can refer to the type of dwelling or the manner in which men and women live together, to the form of judicial punishment, or to the way in which food is prepared. Strictly speaking, there is almost nothing which cannot be done in a "civilized" or an "uncivilized" way. (p. 5)

The discourse of civility and civilization all but disappeared during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), when revolutionary rudeness was the order of the day (Perry, 2002). The return of the discourse coincided with the transformation of the Chinese regime from one of revolution to reform, when ideologies of economic development came to displace those of revolution and class struggle. At the beginning of the era of economic reform, Deng Xiaoping introduced the concept of "socialist spiritual civilization" alongside the idea of material civilization in a speech in 1979. Deng's material civilization emphasizes economic development, and as Dynon (2008) argues, is "an assertive, even aggressive notion, fuelled by globalization, imbued with Western scientism and reminiscent of the German Zivilisation" (p. 88). Deng's notion of "socialist spiritual civilization," on the other hand, refers to "not only education, science, culture . . . but also communist ideas, ideals, beliefs, morality, discipline, revolutionary standpoints and principles, and the comrade-like relations among people" (Deng, 1994, p. 367). These two civilizations served important political purposes at a time of transition.

Whereas Deng's notion of spiritual civilization "remained largely grounded in the language of Chinese socialist ideology" (Dynon, 2008, p. 93), the discourses of civilization under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao put more emphasis on China's earlier cultural traditions, especially Confucianism. As Ford (2015) puts it,

> The growing emphasis upon Chineseness in the regime's self justificatory political narrative was an important part of what Hu termed "channeling public opinion" (i.e. censorship and propaganda work), and Party-State officials in the 2000s increasingly came to speak of the country's system of media controls and political content management as "civilized Web management" . . . characterized by "online cultural products with a harmonious spirit." (p. 6)

Since assuming office in 2012, China's new president, Xi Jinping, has taken the propagation of Confucian culture to a new level. Some of Xi's key pronouncements, such as "China dream" and "the great renaissance of the Chinese nation," are positioned in the lineage of China's Confucian civilization.

Confucian teachings of family harmony, filial piety, and moral cultivation have become slogans in streetside bulletin boards. In November 2013, Xi Jinping paid a personal visit to Confucius's birthplace, where he spoke about the importance of studying Confucian classics. It is in this context that the discourse of civilizing the Web takes on new cultural meanings, for linking online civility to Confucian virtues of harmony, propriety, culture, and self-cultivation elevates online civility to the significance of a great civilizational tradition.

Technologies of Civilizing the Web

In her study of civility in American political culture, Susan Herbst (2010) argues that given the elusive nature of civility as a norm, it is more meaningful to view it as a strategic tool in communication processes instead of as a norm. Shunning debates about whether civility has declined in American society, she examines how civility and its opposite, incivility, are used as strategic tools to serve specific purposes. In presidential campaigns, for example, acts and rhetoric of incivility may be more effective in grabbing public attention than civil talk.

Civility is a strategic tool for regulating the Chinese Internet in the sense that its uses are both aligned with the ideology of civilization and in the service of this ideology. Civility is the practical side of the theoretical apparatus of civilization. Whereas theories of civilizations are articulated by Chinese leaders and theoreticians, the exegesis, elaboration, and implementation of these theories appear in the forms of concrete policies, campaigns, practices, and vocabularies. Conceptually, they are akin to Foucault's (1988) notions of technologies of power and technologies of the self. Technologies of power belong to the realm of governance, whereas technologies of the self are forms of self-governance, or in Foucauldian language, governmentality.

The fusion of hard and soft power in China's approach to Internet censorship is a fusion of governance and governmentality. A political campaign, for example, is initiated and organized by state agencies; as such, it is a technology of power. Yet a state-sponsored political campaign depends on the participation of citizens. Through their own participation, citizens transform themselves into the desired state of civility in their online behavior. This process is technology of the self at work.

Because of the subtle combination of technologies of power and of the self in the mobilization of civility for Internet censorship in China, I will not attempt to differentiate the two. The different technologies of civilizing the Web discussed below often contain elements of both. The logic underlying the seeming randomness of the technologies of civility is the mobilization of all imaginable means of control and persuasion in the name of civility, ranging from administrative and legal statutes and business codes of conduct to discourses about national security and public morality, and even public opinion surveys. Therefore, the discourses of civility are not confined to vocabularies of civilization and civility but encompass a whole glossary of associated concepts. The mention of one, such as civility, virtue, or national security, can work metonymically to suggest the presence of others, thus achieving the rhetorical effect of an entire conceptual and mental apparatus in the management of the population.

Civility and Law and Order

First, the discourse of civilizing the Web is linked to law and order. Although the use of law to criminalize online activities is not new and China has created what Creemers (2016) refers to as a "regulatory Gordian knot" (p. 93), there is a renewed emphasis on law and order in the discourse about online civility. A key development was the issuance of a judicial interpretation on September 8, 2013, by the Chinese Supreme People's Court and Supreme People's Procuratorate stating that people who post false, libeling information on the Internet may face up to three years in prison if the posting is viewed more than 5,000 times or retweeted 500 times, or if it triggers mass protest, disrupts public order, damages the national image, causes bad international publicity, and other such damaging outcomes (Guilford, 2013). This new rule was applied soon afterward, when a 16-year-old boy in a small town in the remote Gansu province was detained for posting a message on the microblogging site Weibo that had indeed been retweeted more than 500 times (Kaiman, 2013). He was charged with posting false information that led to a street demonstration and disrupted social order. Although the young man was later released under public pressure, the issuance of this new rule serves as a warning to the public that law enforcement authorities will not hesitate to penalize online expression in the name of law and order.

Civility and Security

The discourse of civilizing the Internet is increasingly linked to the discourse of national security. This connection is neither new nor restricted to China (see, for instance, Dauvergne & LeBaron, 2014). Yet two recent developments gave the discourse of national security new urgency and public appeal. First, with the Edward Snowden incident in 2013 and the leaking of classified information about surveillance programs run by the U.S. National Security Agency, scholars have come to see more clearly than before the rise of what Giroux (2015) calls a corporate–state surveillance apparatus. Not surprisingly, state agents themselves began to use the Snowden incident as a warning to the public about alleged hidden foreign threats to national security. Under these conditions, the Chinese official discourse about Internet security has gained a new moral persuasion among the Chinese population. The Snowden incident gave Chinese nationalists and policy makers new leverage in arguing for controlling online information flows for the sake of national security.

Second is the establishment in 2014 of the National Security Commission headed by President Xi Jinping and the issuance of the National Security Law and a draft Cybersecurity Law in 2015 (subsequently passed in 2017). The Cybersecurity Law was designed to consolidate and strengthen the currently fragmented legal rules and regulations to keep control over information flows on the Internet (Bethany, 2015). The growing use of the language of national security in Chinese Internet governance shows that increasingly, the Chinese government is invoking the global discourse of securitization to legitimate Internet censorship and surveillance (Deibert & Rohozinski, 2008).

Civility Campaigns

Mass campaigns are a time-tested method of political mobilization in the history of the People's Republic. Orchestrated by the state but dependent on citizens' participation, mass campaigns combine technologies of power with technologies of the self. State-sponsored campaigns in contemporary China,

however, differ enough from the mass campaigns of the Mao era to warrant a refined descriptor—
"managed campaigns" (Perry, 2011). A main difference is that today's campaigns are more pragmatic and
eclectic; they borrow workable models from both traditional Chinese culture and international experiences
(Perry, 2011), both of which were anathema in the politics of the Mao era.

Using campaigns to mobilize the public to civilize the Web is a notable feature of Internet
governance (Cao, 2013). The "managed" features of these civility campaigns consist of the use of a set of
techniques and vocabularies borrowed from traditional Chinese culture and international experiences.
Thus, the Confucian language of harmony, morality, and virtue is used to attack supposedly vulgar and
lewd contents online, and the language and methods of science and reason are used to analyze and
undermine negative emotional expressions.

One example is the national antivulgarity campaign launched in 2009. The goal of the campaign
was "to contain the wide spreading of vulgar contents online, further purify the cultural environment on
the Internet, protect the healthy growth of the under-aged, and promote the healthy and orderly
development of the Internet." (*People's Daily Online*, 2009, January 5, para. 1) On the day of the
launching of the campaign, the China Internet Illegal Information Reporting Center (CIIRC) publicized the
names of 19 websites allegedly containing large amounts of "vulgar contents." They include just about all
the leading commercial sites, such as Google, Baidu, Sina, Sohu, Tencent, Netease, Mop, and Tianya.
Many other websites were closed in the campaign.

Campaigns have targeted not only websites but also new social groups. A crackdown on Internet
opinion leaders in 2013 resorted to Cultural Revolution–style public shaming. On August 23, 2013,
Internet celebrity qua venture capitalist Charles Xue was detained in Beijing on charges of soliciting
prostitution (Barboza, 2013). A naturalized American citizen, Xue was an active and critical commentator
on current affairs on the popular microblogging website Sina Weibo. Making an example of him was a
warning to other influential figures to restrain their online expression. About three weeks after his
detention, Xue was shown on China's major television news channels repenting his misdemeanor and
apologizing for posting unverified information and misguiding his followers (Wan, 2013). The same public
shaming method was used in the summer of 2015 in a state crackdown on rumors. In late August 2015
Wang Xiaolu, a reporter for the financial newspaper *Caijing*, was detained over a stock market story and,
before he was tried, was shown on television making confessions that he had gathered information for his
story "through abnormal channels" (Tsang, 2015).

Model Websites and Model Netizens

In Chinese political culture, negative and positive examples are often used together for purposes
of mass education, mobilization, social control, and human development. Scholars have characterized
Chinese society as an exemplary society, which is governed through examples or models (Bakken, 2000).

Public shaming uses negative examples to teach moral lessons to the public, but positive
exemplars are also common. One method is the honoring of model civilized websites and civilized
netizens. For example, in August, 2015, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), in collaboration

with the propaganda department of Jiangxi Province, launched a national competition of essays and creative works to recognize "2015 China Good Netizens" (*zhongguo hao wangmin*).[2]

Similar projects of selecting model websites and netizens are carried out at the local level. For example, an announcement posted on August 31, 2015, on the website of the government of Yixing City of Jiangsu Province details a citywide competition to select "civilized websites." Its published criteria for evaluating websites are 23 items, each with a score, totaling 100 points.[3]

One might wonder what is achieved through the selecting of model websites and model netizens. Of course, winning a "civilized" website award brings positive publicity. But perhaps more importantly, the real purpose of these competitions is not so much to recognize individuals and organizations as to create public opinion and a social atmosphere inhospitable to "uncivil" online behavior. As the news release launching the 2015 China Good Netizens award makes clear, the goal of the activity is "to create a strong social atmosphere . . .for building a clean and bright Internet space" (CAC, 2015, para. 4).

Internet Civility Volunteers

National competitions to select model civilized websites and model netizens require the voluntary participation of citizens and website owners. Thus, using positive examples for civilizing the Web entails the mobilization of civil society. Civil society here consists of government-sponsored NGOs such as the Internet Society of China, neighborhood committees in every city and town, and individual citizens. The Internet Society of China has been organizing self-discipline campaigns for the Internet industry for years. Traditionally, Chinese neighborhoods are "places of intense governing" with the involvement of "both private and public players" (Tomba, 2014, p. 12). Today, this traditional form of neighborhood governance has been extended to the governance of the Internet, whereby neighborhood committee members are encouraged to surf their local online forums and bulletin boards to monitor speech.

The most ambitious civilizing project, however, is a plan set up by the Chinese Youth League to recruit 20% of its 88 million members as "Internet civility volunteers" (*wangluo wenming zhiyuanzhe*). The plan stipulates that an army of volunteers must be built among college students and through grassroots Youth League organizations. These civility volunteers are charged to "promote positive energy on the Internet" and "to make comments online using a civilized language and rational attitude" to "create a rational, calm, and orderly atmosphere of online opinion." They are encouraged to "actively publish online works that disseminate core socialist values through Weibo, WeChat, forum postings, and videos" (China Youth League, 2015, part 2, para. 1). Although this project is still ongoing and its effects yet unknown, it is not to be dismissed as useless propaganda. As Han's (2015) study of volunteer Internet commentators finds, the voluntary Internet commentators who defend the Chinese regime in cyberspace may have considerable influences on public opinion.

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[2] See http://news.jxntv.cn/zt/zghwm/.

[3] See http://www.yixing.gov.cn/default.php?mod=article&do=detail&tid=444767.

Measuring Civility: Online Opinion Surveys

In the past decade, Chinese government authorities have fully recognized the importance of online public opinion. This has encouraged the growth of an online public opinion industry. In 2009, the Media Opinion Monitoring Office of *People's Daily Online* took the lead as the first official institution to publish regular survey reports on "Internet mass incidents." The reports are sold to government and business subscribers at a handsome price. Short-term courses for training public opinion analysts offered by *People's Daily Online* and the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology can cost up to 10,000 yuan for just a few days (Bo, 2014). *People's Daily Online* remains the leader in this online public opinion industry, but many other research institutions, commercial and academic, have joined the fray.

Using social surveys and public opinion polls for social control and governance has been studied by critical media scholars (Herbst, 2011; Peters, 1995). In China, it has a history dating back to the Republican era (Lam, 2011). Mining big data of online sentiments for commercial and surveillance purposes, however, is a recent fad. In China, online public opinion survey reports serve at least two purposes in the national project of civilizing the Web. First, the survey reports track hot-button incidents on social media, including online protests, and provide metrics showing whether a specific incident has generated positive or negative energy and whether the online sentiments associated with it are positive or negative. These survey reports may then be used to guide policy making in how to manage online expression or as training manuals to help government officials or business managers better understand and control Internet incidents and crisis situations.[4]

Second, they create and help to popularize a new vocabulary of Internet governance that is being adopted in both official and public media discourse. A distinct feature of these survey reports is the use of indicators to attribute degrees of emotionality, rationality, hopefulness, apathy, and pessimism to Internet incidents. This provides a convenient and seemingly scientific approach to measuring the degree of positive or negative energy in online speech, which could then be deployed for more effective "social management" (Pieke, 2012). The measures of emotionality and rationality ultimately serve to delegitimate online speech that is critical of the party-state because they advocate a vision of online speech that sees critical emotions in online expressions as political threats and social pollution.

Coopting Internet Businesses as Civility Watchers

Another method of civilizing the Web is coopting Internet firms into cooperating agents of control. One common practice is to mobilize Internet businesses to make self-discipline pledges. Although pledges have previously been made about self-discipline for search engines, about rumormongering, and so forth, it still came as a surprise that on November 6, 2014, the CAC orchestrated a ceremony for 29 major websites to pledge self-disciplinary management of their user-comments (*gentie*) functions. This shows that party authorities are paying meticulous attention to previously neglected aspects of Internet culture, in this case, user comments.

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[4] For an example, see the "Internet Degree of Consensus Report for July 2015" issued by People's Net at http://yuqing.people.com.cn/n/2015/0811/c392404-27443332.html.

If this new measure to control the speech in the comments function shows a creative approach to managing the novel features of the Internet, another policy shows that traditional forms of governance are still important. At a May 2015 conference of United Front—a longstanding institution of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to manage its relations with non-CCP groups and individuals—President Xi Jinping told the participants to strengthen relationships with representatives of new media so that they can help to civilize cyberspace. What Xi refers to as "representatives of new media" consist of two types of individuals—entrepreneurs in the Internet industry and new media "content producers" (or Internet opinion leaders) (Run, 2015). The goal of reaching out to new media personnel, according to an article on the website of the Ministry of United Front, is "to achieve 'two healthy's'—to guide and help the representative figures in new media to have a healthy growth, and to support and promote the healthy development of the new media industry" (Run, 2015, para. 11). The article also states that a "healthy" new media entrepreneur would be a patriotic and responsible person who "consciously practices core socialist values" and that a healthy new media sector would be a "clean web environment" which generates positive energy (para. 13). Apparently following through on Xi's new directive, head of CAC Lu Wei dined half a dozen Internet public opinion leaders on November 9, 2014 (Kang, 2014).

Under pressure from the government, major websites are more vigilant than ever about their contents. For example, as the platform where most cases of Internet protest start, Sina Weibo has been a prime target of control. Back in 2010, it had already set up a team charged with the mission of stopping rumors. The team worked around the clock to monitor the content on Sina Weibo. Sina Weibo also created a new function to display and expose rumors on its front page. For example, on February 4, 2012, Sina Weibo's front page displayed a notice saying: "A Weibo message claims that a couple from Jiangxi was beaten up in Sanya; one was injured and the other killed. This is a rumor. The people who posted it have been penalized." Three individuals were said to be involved in this case. Sina closed their accounts for half a year as a penalty.

As of July 2015, Sina Weibo's community management regulations stipulate that three types of information are to be managed in accordance with the values of "civilization, harmony, equality, and friendliness" (Weibo shequ guanli zhongxin, 2015, article 9). These are harmful information, illegal information, and false information. Illegal information may be easiest to understand, but what counts as harmful or false information is not a matter of easy judgment and may depend entirely on whether and how the information conforms with official norms. These regulations mean that Sina Weibo can willfully delete postings if its editors consider them harmful.

Using Civility to Demobilize Online Contention: Two Cases

How are the technologies of civility mobilized to undermine critical online speech? The first case concerns public responses to the death of a street peddler named Xia Junfeng. On September 16, 2009, Xia stabbed to death two city inspectors in the northeastern city of Shenyang. Xia pleaded not guilty, claiming that he had acted out of self-defense after he was beaten up by officials. Xia was convicted of murder, given the death penalty, and executed on September 25, 2013. One week after Xia's death, his widow, Zhang Jing, held a funeral. Online, there were many expressions of sympathy for Zhang and her late husband and anger at China's law enforcement authorities. This was not surprising, because the

public had been sympathetic to Xia from the beginning, and there was a persistent and strong distrust of law enforcement officials in Chinese society. Some of the most influential Internet protests had targeted law enforcement authorities.

Yet unlike before, the outpourings of public sympathy this time were met with a counteroffensive from official media, anonymous Internet commentators, and a newly minted online character type known as *li zhong ke* (the "rational, neutral, and objective type"). The target of the counteroffensive was sympathetic emotional outpouring; reason was the weapon. As a Chinese analyst puts it (Song, 2013), the side represented by Xia's widow, Zhang Jing, mobilized emotions of sympathy and pity, whereas the challengers attacked Zhang and her sympathizers by calling for rational and civil behavior and by diverting attention from the key issues at hand (i.e., questions of accountability of law enforcement authorities). Thus, some people alleged that the paintings of Zhang Jing's 13-year-old son were plagiarized. Others noted that Zhang Jing had posted a photograph of a teary man on her Weibo timeline who was not her late husband but another street peddler. Zhang was put on the defensive to respond to the accusations. Similar attacks against "irrational" emotional outpourings were made in mainstream media. An editorial on the CCTV website states: "In the face of those excessively emotion-stirring words or fanatic stories, net friends should reduce their impulsive participation, be more calm, more rational, and not just becoming filled with indignation and anger like others" (P. Z. Yang, 2013, para. 7).

The point here is not that Zhang Jing was right and her critics were wrong, but the case illustrates how civility and reason were used by official media and pro-government Internet commentators to claim high moral ground and to undermine the outpouring of online sentiment against social injustices.

The second case concerns the tragedy of the *Oriental Star* cruise, which capsized in the waters of Hubei province on June 1, 2015, on its way from Nanjing to Chongqing. Only 12 of the 454 people on board survived. Such a tragedy would have triggered an online protest in the past, but as the *People's Daily Online* reports, no such online crisis happened. On the contrary, according to the same report, "positive" emotions surpassed "negative" emotions in the most critical first few days. Considering this a successful case of managing online opinion, the report attributes the success to effective government responses—government departments publicized the names of all passengers within 24 hours, and the information was widely reprinted by regional media. They used Weibo and WeChat to publicize information and dispel questions from the public (*People's Daily Online*, 2015, July 10).

What is not mentioned in the *People's Daily* report is that government authorities maintained tight control over information and news reporting about the tragic incident. As Wong and Ramzy(2015) report,

> Images and reporting from the site of the overturned ship were largely limited to state media outlets for the first 24 hours. A propaganda directive ordered domestic news media not to send reporters to the scene and to rely on accounts from "authoritative media." (para. 8)

Public responses, however, reveal the ambivalent effects of the uses of the civility discourse to contain online protest. For one thing, it is not clear whether negative sentiments were absent because they were not expressed or because they had been censored. *The New York Times* story cited above (Wong & Ramzy, 2016) reports that phrases such as *Oriental Star* and *shipwreck* "were the most censored search terms on the Sina Weibo microblog platform" (para. 15). Furthermore, the very efforts of official media to project positive emotions met with resistance from netizens. One post, titled "Ten Most Disgusting Titles in Official Media," was widely retweeted on Sina Weibo. One of these "disgusting titles" is, "On Ground Zero, China's Most Handsome Men Are All There!" Another is: "How Fortunate to Be Born a Chinese!"

Repulsed by such sensational headlines in government media, netizens posted sarcastic and critical responses. On Zhihu, a popular Chinese question-and-answer website similar to Quora, someone posted the following question:

> In the afternoon on the day after the accident, large volumes of speeches appeared which praised the hard work of the rescuers, glorified the nation, and expressed deeply moved feelings. This went against the usual turn of events in the past when voices of questioning and accountability would first appear after an accident. Moreover, voices expressing emotions of gratitude to the rescuers drowned the voices expressing sympathy for the victims and their families. If different voices appeared, they would be attacked by crowds and accused of being keyboard warriors. Does this mean that Internet opinion is gradually tilting toward supporting the government, being rational and wise, or are there other reasons? (*China Digital Times*, 2015, June 6, p. 1)

This posting was repeatedly deleted by Zhihu editors and then reposted. One user response is: "Why is it rational to be supportive of the government?" (*China Digital Times*, 2015, June 6, p.4)

This case suggests that the Chinese regime's approach to the management of online emotions is two sided. Whereas government policies and mainstream ideological discourses attack the emotional and irrational nature of online expression, official media resort to their own emotional mobilization of the public by promoting positive emotions and attacking negative ones. As this case shows, such an approach may backfire. Government authorities may be successful in civilizing the Web, thus reducing the frequency of Internet protests, but the technologies of civility have their limits.

Conclusion

Online activism in China has suffered a setback in recent years. I have argued that the main cause is the systematic demobilization of critical emotional expressions in the name of *wenming*, or civility and civilization. This discourse provides ideological legitimacy for an entire apparatus of technologies of power and control exercised in the name of civility—a process of civilizing the Chinese Web. By targeting online emotional outpourings, the civility discourse aims to manage the political threats of powerful public emotions in a hypermediated society.

The goal of this civility discourse is to engender a civic online public that produces positive, not negative, emotional energies. Viewed from the perspectives of liberal theories of public spheres and online deliberation (Calhoun, 1992; Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004; Medaglia & Yang, 2017; Papacharissi, 2002), the construction of this civic online public is ironic. Whereas reasoned discourse is the hallmark of a deliberative and critical public sphere, in the Chinese project of civilizing the Web, reason is turned into a tool for censorship.

The civilizing process, however, does not target all emotions, only emotions considered "negative" and critical, such as anger and indignation. Positive emotions such as loyalty to the party-state and love of the nation are actively promoted to counter the critical effects of negative emotions.

Another feature of the technologies of civilizing the Web is the mobilization of citizens and civil society. This method was the essence of mass politics in the Mao era. What is notable is its return in new technological disguises in the form of "Internet civility volunteers" and "model civilized websites." Together, these technologies of Internet civility amount to a new digital politics of mass participation—a participatory model of Internet censorship. The process of the parallel development of modern forms of self-management and state governance known as the civilizing process, which Elias (1939/2000) studied long ago, not only continues in today's world but has expanded to the new technological spheres.

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