Normalization of Censorship: Evidence from China*

Tony Zirui Yang†

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Abstract

Previous research claims that public awareness of censorship will lead to backlash against the regime. However, surveys consistently find that Chinese citizens are apathetic or even supportive of the government's censorship policy. To explain this puzzle, I argue that citizens are subject to a process of normalization. Specifically, individuals become desensitized to censorship when the range of censored content expands beyond politically threatening topics like government criticism and collective action to other seemingly harmless non-political issues. Using a dataset of 15,872 censored articles on WeChat and an original survey experiment in China, I show that (1) a majority of censored articles are unrelated to politically threatening topics, and (2) respondents exposed to both political and non-political censorship display less backlash toward the regime and its censorship policy than those who were only exposed to political censorship. My findings highlight normalization as a powerful tool of authoritarian control.

Keywords: Censorship, China, Normalization, Desensitization, Backlash, Authoritarian Control

Word Count: 9,451

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†PhD Student, Department of Political Science, Washington University, St Louis, Campus Box 1063, One Brookings Drive, MO 63130, Email: yangzirui@wustl.edu

Introduction

Recent scholarship claims that public awareness of censorship activities will lead to backlash against the regime and its censorship policy (for an overview, see: Roberts 2020). According to these studies, citizens exposed to censorship events express more anger and anti-regime sentiment (Pan and Siegel 2020; Roberts 2018, 137),[1] search and discuss more about the censored topics (Nabi 2014; Pan and Siegel 2020; Roberts 2018, 143), show less support for Internet regulation (Roberts 2018, 144), and even participate in protests against the regime (Boxell and Steinert-Threlkeld 2019). However, in China, where government censorship is massive and unprecedented (Gueorguiev and Malesky 2019; Han 2018; King, Pan and Roberts 2013; Miller 2018), surveys consistently find Chinese citizens are mostly apathetic or even supportive of the regime's censorship policy. For example, Dickson (2016, 71) reports Chinese citizens who have experienced censorship are "rather blasé about it." Roberts (2018, 136) finds the largest proportion of users with censorship experience say "they wouldn't care" about censorship. Wang and Mark (2015) show that a majority (65.6%) of "censorship-aware respondents" are either neutral or supportive of Internet censorship. If awareness of censorship leads to backlash, why do a majority of Chinese citizens display such little resistance to the widespread use of overt censorship?

This puzzle likely arises because the literature that developed the backlash argument primarily focuses on censorship of government criticism and collective action like protests. Although political content has traditionally been understood as the prime targets of censorship (Gueorguiev and Malesky 2019; King, Pan and Roberts 2013, 2014; Miller 2018; Roberts 2018), other forms of censorship, such as prohibitions of pornography (King, Pan and Roberts 2013), Hip-Pop music (Nie 2021), and pop culture movies (Esberg 2020), are also widely used in authoritarian regimes. In this article, I argue that backlash against censorship can be reduced if the range of overt censorship covers both politically threatening

[1] Pan and Siegel (2020) study the repression of online activists in Saudi Arabia, which is analogous to political censorship.

messages and other seemingly harmless topics, because this leads citizens to no longer view censorship as repression of opposition. Rather, it becomes a normal government policy that regulates both political speeches and apolitical content like entertainment, rumor, gossip, and advertisement. I call this process *normalization of censorship*.

My argument about censorship normalization builds on the psychological theory of desensitization (Bartholow, Bushman and Sestir 2006; Carnagey, Anderson and Bushman 2007; Fanti et al. 2009). Conventionally, citizens react negatively to political censorship because it could be seen as a signal that the government has something to hide and is not acting as a faithful agent (Lorentzen 2014; Roberts 2018; Shadmehr and Bernhardt 2015). When both politically threatening messages and non-political content are censored, it dilutes the probability that each censorship event contains valuable political information to discover government wrongdoings (Pan and Siegel 2020; Roberts 2020). In addition to dilution, censoring non-political content also increases citizens' exposure to censorship activities, which further facilitates the normalization process. As individuals are more frequently exposed to censorship activities, they are more likely to view censorship activities as normal events and not react as intensely. As a result of dilution and repeated exposure, citizens' negative reactions toward censorship, such as anger and anti-regime sentiment, should decrease when censorship applies to a broader range of content (Wang and Mark 2015).

To support my theory of censorship normalization, I first use observational data to illustrate the possibility that censorship normalization happens in China. I collected and categorized 15,872 censored articles on WeChat from March 2018 to May 2020. Using both human-coders and supervised text analysis, I show that collective action, government criticism, and other government-related content only account for around 40% of all censored articles. The majority of censored articles are politically non-threatening and include a wide range of apolitical topics, such as business, entertainment, sexuality, advertisement, local events, traditions, and foreign news.

I then conducted an original survey experiment in China to compare traditional cen-

sorship which primarily targets politically threatening messages (government criticism and collective action) with normalized censorship whose targets include both political and non-political content. In the experiment, I randomly expose respondents to varying amounts of political and non-political censorship. Consistent with the normalization theory, respondents exposed to both political and non-political censorship display significantly less backlash and greater support for the censorship policy and the regime, compared with respondents exposed to only political censorship.

The results of this study contribute to the understanding of citizens' reactions and resilience to government censorship. It bridges the gap between the seemingly contradictory observations that on one hand, censorship awareness will lead to backlash, and on the other hand, citizens are numb to the massive overt censorship activities in China. By showing the desensitizing effect of large scale censorship, I expand the existing understanding that governments only use overt censorship to create fear (Roberts 2018, 2020), whereas preferring covert forms of censorship to avoid backlash (Miller 2018; Roberts 2020). Overt censorship when applied broadly might not lead to backlash.

A broader implication of these findings concerns the toolkits of authoritarian governments. A wealth of scholarship has investigated how authoritarian governments persuade people through propaganda, silence dissent through censorship, and prevent uprisings through repression (Arendt 1973; Chen and Xu 2017; Geddes and Zaller 1989; Guriev and Treisman 2015; Huang 2018; Pan, Shao and Xu 2020; Shadmehr and Bernhardt 2015; Svolik 2012). My study identifies an additional, and perhaps more powerful tool of the autocrats: desensitizing the citizens to coercion by normalizing the coercive policy. Such an approach is potentially more difficult to undermine because citizens unconsciously accept the coercive policy as normal.

Normalization of Censorship: A Theory

The central argument of this paper is that, when the targets of censorship include both politically threatening and seemingly harmless non-political content, it normalizes censorship policy, desensitizes citizens to censorship activities, and reduces backlash against both the censorship apparatus and the regime. Such normalizing effects are primarily achieved by diluting the proportion of political censorship. In addition to dilution, censoring non-political content also increases citizens' exposure to censorship activities, which further facilitates the normalization process.

Diluting the Proportion of Political Censorship

Backlash to political censorship happens when citizens are aware of censorship activities and care about what has been censored (Chen and Yang 2019; Roberts 2020). The extent to which citizens care about censorship activities depends on the nature of the censored content. Conventionally, the government tends to target the most politically threatening information, such as messages with collective action potential and government criticism (Lorentzen 2014; King, Pan and Roberts 2013, 2014; Shadmehr and Bernhardt 2015). Hence, censorship is political and could be seen as a signal that the regime has something to hide and is not acting as a faithful agent for the citizens (Lorentzen 2014; Roberts 2018; Shadmehr and Bernhardt 2015). It indicates abnormality and potential government wrongdoings. Moreover, the act of censorship itself could be seen as abuse of power. As a result, citizens will pay even closer attention to the censored information to find out what has been hidden from them. Given the difficulty of completely covering-up information on the Internet (Roberts 2018), once the citizens uncover the censored information, the anger toward the government will be magnified. Consistent with this logic, several recent studies have found evidence of backlash against political censorship activities (Pan and Siegel 2020; Roberts 2018, 2020).

For such backlash to occur, however, it is critical that citizens believe censorship is

abnormal and censored information is valuable for discovering government wrongdoings. Similar to the psychological process of desensitization in which subjects' negative reactions to a stimulus diminish when negative expectations are altered (Carnagey, Anderson and Bushman 2007; Efran and Marcia 1967; Goldfried 1971; Marcia, Rubin and Efran 1969), if the citizens view censorship as normal, they will no longer pay attention to censorship events in the first place. As a result, subsequent backlash against censorship is less likely to happen.

Under what conditions will citizens believe that censorship is normal? Citizens' beliefs about censorship are formed and updated by their direct and indirect interaction with censorship activities. Direct interaction with censorship, such as having one's own message censored, is likely to cause backlash, because their own rights of free speech are directly infringed. In contrast, indirect interaction with censorship, such as observing a web page blocked or discussing censorship online, does not necessarily lead to backlash. When users observe a deleted post, they rely on the remaining information such as the title of the post, the author of the post, and other users' comments and reactions under the post to update their beliefs about censorship.[2] If the content is not politically sensitive, users will update their beliefs and do not associate censorship with hiding politically valuable information in the future.

Moreover, users often talk about censorship in online conversations in both political and apolitical contexts (Han 2018). For instance, in February 2020, the fans of Xiao Zhan – a Chinese entertainment star – and other fans engaged in an argument that frequently involved demands for censorship of the other side's posts. Such conversation implies that censorship can be applied to completely non-political posts on entertainment stars. People observing it might be less likely to think that censorship is about political repression.

According to existing surveys, only 9% of the respondents experienced censorship directly

[2]How much information remains after censorship depends on individual websites and social media platforms. On WeChat, if an article is deleted, users can still see the title of it. Only if they try to click on the link to access the full article will they find out the content is censored. Sina Weibo has more varieties of censorship. See Miller (2018) for more information about Sina Weibo.

(Dickson 2016), despite the fact that 69.5% of the respondents are aware of government censorship (Wang and Mark 2015). Hence, direct interaction is relatively rare and most citizens form beliefs about censorship via indirectly interacting with censorship. Therefore, the range of censored content has a strong influence on citizens' beliefs toward censorship. By intentionally censoring seemingly harmless non-political topics, the value of censorship activities in signaling government wrongdoing is significantly diluted. In response, citizens update their beliefs about censored information and do not display as much backlash when they encounter censorship (Hill 2017; Wang and Mark 2015). Furthermore, if unpopular content, such as pop culture in the eye of conservative citizens, is also censored, citizens might even think positively about these specific censorship activities and be more supportive of the censorship apparatus in general (Esberg 2020).

In short, including non-political content in the censorship targets dilutes the proportion of political censorship and changes citizens' belief that censorship is abnormal and hiding politically valuable information such as government scandals. As a result, the initial negative reactions to political censorship should be reduced.

Increasing Citizens' Exposure to Censorship

In addition to dilution, including non-political content in the censorship targets increases the frequency of citizens' exposure to censorship, which further facilitates the normalization process. As stated above, the belief that censorship is abnormal is critical for backlash to occur. If the chance of encountering censorship increases in citizens' daily lives, it is more likely for them to view censorship as normal and not pay too much attention to it.

A deeper look into the psychological mechanism suggests that such a desensitizing effect is due to the blunted reactions after repeated exposure to similar stimuli. Initially, a negative stimulus, such as violence or repression, arouses cognitive, physiological, and emotional responses (Anderson et al. 2010; Bartholow, Bushman and Sestir 2006; Carnagey, Anderson and Bushman 2007). Repeated exposure to the same stimulus, even over a short period of

time, leads to blunted evaluative categorization and elimination of physiological and emotional reactions (Bartholow, Bushman and Sestir 2006; Carnagey, Anderson and Bushman 2007; Fanti et al. 2009). Similarly, although the initial exposure to censorship might arouse intense cognitive and emotional reactions, such as anger and resentment, such cognitive and emotional responses should decrease as individuals are more frequently exposed to censorship activities. As a result, citizens are more likely to regard censorship as normal.

The normalizing effect of repeated exposures further facilitates indirect interactions with censorship. Because citizens regard censorship as normal and common in daily life, they would not deliberately avoid it in conversation like they do with other sensitive topics. The example above about the online argument involving Xiao Zhan's fans illustrates how censorship could be a normal topic that is frequently mentioned in online conversations. The effect of repeated exposure becomes a positive circle that reinforces the belief that censorship is normal.

Empirical Expectations

To summarize the empirical expectations of the theoretical arguments laid out above, I hypothesize that *citizens exposed to normalized censorship, which targets both politically threatening and seemingly harmless non-political content, will display less backlash against both the censorship policy (H1) and the regime (H2), compared with citizens exposed to traditional censorship which only targets politically threatening content.*

Before I test the two main hypotheses, however, I need to illustrate that censorship normalization happens in China. One observable implication of the normalization strategy is that non-political censorship accounts for a large proportion of all censorship activities, i.e., Pr(Non-Political Censorship|All Censorship) is high. To be clear, this is not to say that non-political content is more likely to be censored than political content, i.e., Pr(Censorship|Non-Political Content) > Pr(Censorship|Political Content), or vice versa. I do not test which category is more likely to be censored. Instead, I aim to verify that non-political censorship

happens on a substantial scale. In the following sections, I first present an observational study that uses text analysis to identify the nature of censored content and then present experimental evidence supporting my main hypotheses.

The Development of Censorship in China

I test my theory of censorship normalization in mainland China. Although online censorship conducted by the government or social media companies occurs in almost every country, especially in authoritarian regimes, the range and scale of government censorship in China is by far the largest (King, Pan and Roberts 2013; Roberts 2018). Moreover, in recent years, overt censorship activities in China have become more aggressive (Freedom House 2019). In addition to politically threatening messages, many seemingly harmless posts that include sensationalism, speculation, and tabloid gossip are also censored (Cairns and Carlson 2016; Han 2018; Huang 2017; Ng 2015). Once-tolerated platforms focused on apolitical topics, including entertainment and dating applications, faced new restrictions (Freedom House 2019). Information and discussions on subjects like the economy that have traditionally been given freer rein became more systematically censored (Tai and Fu 2020).

Meanwhile, the Chinese government and social media companies have become more explicit on their intention to regulate online expression and censor "inappropriate" content. In 2014, the Chinese government established the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) to centralize the administrative power and reduce agency loss that used to provide leeway for social media companies to partially resist government censorship efforts (Han 2018; Miller 2018). Since its establishment, the CAC has been regularly publishing its censorship activities on its official website, which often receives media attention. Social media companies have also started to publicly acknowledge and justify their censorship activities. In April 2020, WeChat, the largest social media platform in China, publicized its censorship of more than 15,000 articles on its platform (The Paper 2020).

More importantly, the justifications for these publicized censorship activities are mainly apolitical which diverts sharply from traditional threats of repression or showcase of regime strength. When mentioning censorship in public, the government often emphasizes the dark side of the Internet and highlights the need for Internet regulations. For example, the Party General Secretary Xi Jinping once noted in a public speech:

> "No one wants to live in a [cyberspace] full of falsehood, fraud, attack, abuse, terror, pornography, and violence. The Internet is not outside the law. Tightening Internet regulation and strengthening Internet governance are the responsibility of the government to the people and the society." (Xinhua 2018)

Other officials, such as the former director of the CAC, also publicly referred to censorship as "management" of "inappropriate" content (China Youth Daily 2015). Consistent with such an apolitical narrative, WeChat framed its censorship as countering false information (The Paper 2020). This further shows to the public that the focus of censorship is not political dissent but "inappropriate" content such as false information.

Combining the different pieces of anecdotes above, it becomes clearer that the Chinese government intends to create an apolitical and benevolent image of censorship policy by both extending the range of censorship to non-political content and emphasizing the non-political aspect of its censorship policy.

The Nature of Censored Content: Text Analysis

To better illustrate that censorship normalization happens in China, I use text analysis to more rigorously show that non-political censorship occurs on a substantial scale. I collect censored articles from March 2018 to May 2020 on WeChat, the largest social media platform in China. I then classify the censored articles into nine different topic categories, including three political and six non-political categories. The main outcome of interest is the proportion of censored articles by topic category. To ensure the reliability of the categorization

process, I use two human coders, multiple text analysis models, and cross-validations.

Data Source

My observational study relies on the WeChatScope data of censored articles on WeChat public accounts. WeChatScope is a website created by a research team at the University of Hong Kong (Tai and Fu 2020), which monitors 4000 WeChat public accounts in real-time. These public accounts are analogous to Facebook public pages or Telegram public groups. Because these public accounts might have a large number of subscribers and therefore be influential, they are the prime target of WeChat censorship. The dataset contains 15,872 articles spanning from March 2018 to May 2020.

WeChat is an ideal platform for analyzing the implication of government censorship on citizens' attitudes because it is the single most popular social media in Mainland China. By 2020, it has over 1.2 billion daily active users, and a 78% penetration rate (Iqbal 2020). As such, WeChat censorship influences a large proportion of the Chinese population and most Chinese are likely to form their beliefs about censorship via WeChat.

Although censorship practice on WeChat might not be identical to other social media platforms or government censorship instructions due to principal-agent problems (Miller 2018), the inconsistency has reduced significantly in recent years. Since the establishment of the CAC in 2014, the government has gained considerable leverage over social media platforms. Platforms that fail to enforce government censorship orders are more seriously punished by the CAC than before its establishment. Overall, there is no evidence suggesting either atypical censorship practice on WeChat or bias against political content.

Using the WeChatScope data provides a hard case to illustrate the existence of large-scale non-political censorship. Because the WeChatScope project is designed to capture government censorship as conventionally understood, political accounts are over-represented in the sample (Tai and Fu 2020).[3] Therefore, even if the selected public accounts might not

[3]The WeChatScope project primarily includes accounts related to social and political news or commen-

be representative of all public accounts, the bias is likely to be in the opposite direction of my theoretical expectations.

Categorization of Censored Articles

I aim to examine the proportion of censored articles by topic category. As such, categorizing the censored articles is central to this analysis. In total, I keep track of nine different topic categories. In addition to three political categories: (1) collective action, (2) government criticism, and (3) government (non-criticism), I also include six non-political categories: (1) business & economy, (2) entertainment & sexuality, (3) advertisement, (4) local events, traditions, cultures, (5) foreign news, and (6) others.

The categorization process mainly follows Miller (2018), because Miller (2018) provides the most detailed and up-to-date categorization of censored content in China. One important difference from Miller (2018) is that the nine categories are mutually exclusive. A similar strategy is employed by King, Pan and Roberts (2013). Having mutually exclusive categories simplifies the categorization process as well as the interpretation of the results. The detailed explanation of each topic category and coding process can be found in Online Appendix D.

To categorize more than 15,000 articles, I first hand-label a training set of 2,500 articles and then use supervised text analysis to predict the categories of the remaining articles. Two coders have coded the training set independently. The Cohen's κ between the two coders is 0.80, higher than the commonly applied criteria of 0.70 for inter-coder reliability tests.

To predict the remaining 13,000 unlabeled data, I first train a multinomial logistic regression model with ridge estimator using the 2,500 labeled data (Hoerl and Kennard 1970; Le Cessie and Van Houwelingen 1992). Then, I use the model as well as the text corpus to predict the unlabeled data. The details of the model can be found in Online Appendix E.

tary. It also samples influential public accounts including (a) public accounts for the government and the Communist Party; (b) high ranked accounts; and (c) accounts with article links posted on a major discussion forum or indexed by Baidu search engine (Tai and Fu 2020). In Online Appendix G.1, I provide additional empirical evidence confirming that political accounts are over-represented. Political accounts consist of 41% of all public accounts in the dataset and articles published by these political accounts consist of 53% of the full dataset. Both figures are much larger than any other type of public accounts.

Results

Table 1 reports the predicted proportion of censored articles by topic category. Consistent with the empirical expectations, a substantial proportion of censored articles are unrelated to politically threatening topics. As shown in table 1, collective action and government-related articles only account for 39.34% of all censored articles, whereas non-politically threatening content consist of the majority (60.67%) of censored articles on WeChat. However, there is not a clear pattern among these non-political articles. Around 14.43% of the articles are categorized as business and economy. Another 20.32% belongs to the entertainment and sexuality category. The advertisement category, the local events, traditions and cultures category, and the foreign news category account for around 7.4%, 12.28%, and 3.38% of the censored articles respectively. The remaining 2.86% of the articles do not fit into any specified topic category and therefore fall into the residual group of articles.

Table 1: Predicted Proportion of Censored Articles by Topic Category

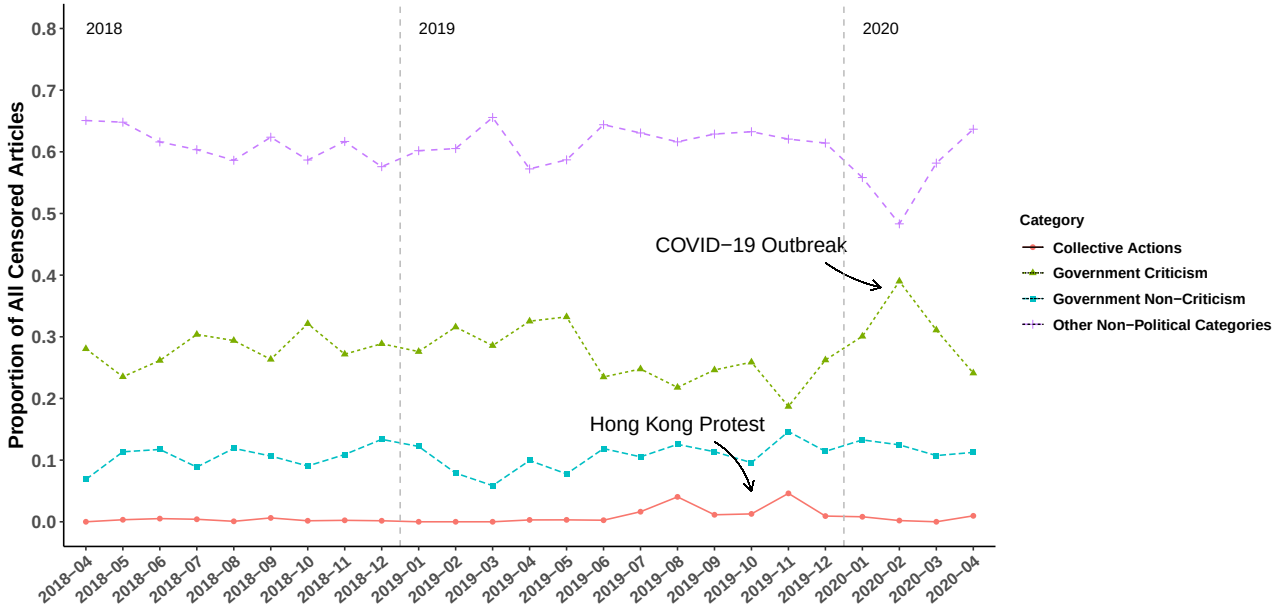
General Category	Percentage	Specific Topic Category	Percentage
Political	39.34%	Collective Action	0.67%
		Government Criticism	27.94%
		Government (Non-Criticism)	10.73%
Non-Political	60.67%	Business & Economy	14.43%
		Entertainment & Sexuality	20.32%
		Advertisement	7.40%
		Local Events, Traditions, Cultures	12.28%
		Foreign News	3.38%
		Others	2.86%

Notes: The total number of articles is 15,872. A training set of 2,500 articles is labeled by two human-coders independently. In-sample cross-validation suggests that government criticism category is over-estimated by the model, whereas most other categories are under-estimated. In the training set, both coders find around 30% of the articles are political.

The pattern that non-politically threatening content constitutes a majority of the censored articles is also mostly consistent over time. Figure 1 shows the time series of the proportion of collective action, government criticism, government non-criticism, and other non-politically threatening topic categories. Even during the COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020

when government suppression of online criticisms was most active, non-politically threatening content still accounts for around 48% of all censored articles.

Figure 1: Time Series of All Censored Articles by Topic Category



Notes: Other categories include: Business & Economy, Entertainment & Sexuality, Advertisement, Local Events & Cultures & Traditions, Foreign News, and Others. These categories are considered as non-political.

Alternative text analysis models as well as a three-fold cross-validation are used to test the robustness of the results. The predictions are mostly consistent with the multinomial model, showing the existence of large scale non-political censorship. More details of the alternative models and cross-validation can be found in Online Appendix E and F.

The implications of the empirical results are two-fold. First, the results from WeChat censorship echo the narrative in the previous section showing that the Chinese government has spent considerable effort in censoring non-politically threatening content while downplaying political censorship. The fact that collective action and government-related articles account for a minority of all censored content strengthens the government's claim that censorship is normal and benevolent. Besides, the fact that there is not a clear pattern for

apolitical censorship implies that the government censorship policy is broad and comprehensive rather than narrow and focused on one specific type of apolitical content (Esberg 2020). This gives the government leeway for including some political content in the broadly targeted censorship activities without drawing too much attention to political censorship.

Second, the results imply that Chinese citizens are more likely to encounter censorship of apolitical content than censorship of government criticism and collective action. As a result, their expectations of censorship outcomes are likely to be shaped by these experiences of apolitical censorship, which provides favorable conditions for the desensitization process to take place.

Normalizing Effect of Censorship: Survey Experiment

The previous section provides observational evidence that non-political censorship happens on a substantial scale and verifies the validity of the two main hypotheses. To test the two main hypotheses, I experimentally manipulate the topics of censorship targets and the frequency of censorship activities that participants are exposed to. I then use their *ex post* evaluations of the censorship policy and the regime to measure the level of backlash induced by censorship.

Participants

The survey experiment was conducted in December 2020 in mainland China.[4] The 612 participants were recruited from a Chinese online survey platform and then directed to an American-based website, Qualtrics, where they completed the survey anonymously. Previous research has shown that using online platforms such as Amazon Mechanical Turk is a reliable way to recruit participants for survey experiments (Mullinix et al. 2015), and Chinese online platforms might even be better than American online platforms because political opinion

[4]This study is pre-registered on EGAP (`egap.org`).

surveys are relatively rare in China and participants are less likely to be professional political survey takers (Huang 2018; Huang and Yeh 2019).[5]

Due to the tension between China and the U.S. during the period of the study, Chinese respondents may respond differently to a survey from an American-based institution than to a Chinese survey company. Hence, any information in the survey that could possibly reveal the fact that this is a survey from a foreign institution, including logo, header, and country-specific URLs, was removed or replaced. No respondent left any comment about the U.S. or any other countries at the end of the survey.

The sample in this study covers a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds and is demographically similar to the Chinese Internet population in terms of gender, urban/rural, and regional distributions. However, like many other online surveys in China, the sample is richer and better-educated than the general Internet population (Huang 2018; Pan and Xu 2020). To address these concerns, I conduct interaction analyses and find no significant heterogeneous treatment effect with respect to age, income, and education.[6] Hence, it is unlikely that this specific sample causes bias in the estimates. More detailed descriptive statistics of this sample are available in Online Appendix A.

Experimental Design

The purpose of the experiment is to compare traditional censorship which primarily targets politically threatening messages (government criticism and collective action) with normalized censorship which targets both politically threatening and seemingly harmless non-political content. The experiment includes three components. First, participants answered pre-treatment questions about their socioeconomic backgrounds, political interests, economic ideology, and exposure to social media. Second, participants were randomly assigned to a control group where they would be exposed to only censorship of government

[5]At the end of the survey, respondents were allowed to leave comments on the survey questions. The vast majority of the comments were positive and many said "[they] hope there could be more these kinds of surveys in China." This further shows that participants were excited rather than scared by political surveys.

[6]See Online Appendix B.3.

criticism and collective action, or a treatment group where they would be exposed to censorship of *both political and non-political content*. Finally, they answered post-treatment questions about their attitudes toward the censorship policy and the regime.

To expose participants to censorship, I asked respondents to read ten articles, one at a time, selected from WeChat with only the titles and a screenshot of the first couple lines.[7] Some of the articles were labeled as censored by WeChat. These censorship labels primed the respondents that certain articles were censored by WeChat. Notwithstanding the titles, screenshots, and censorship labels, no further information was provided to the respondents. Figure 2 shows one of the articles with and without censorship label. Among the ten articles, six were about non-political topics, whereas four were about government criticism and collective action. The order of the articles was randomized.

In the control group, three out of the four political articles were labeled as censored by WeChat, whereas none of the non-political articles were labeled. This primed the respondents in the control group that censorship primarily targets politically threatening content. In the treatment group, three out of the six non-political articles were labeled as censored by WeChat in addition to the three political articles in the control group. In other words, there were a total of six articles that were labeled in the treatment group and three in the control. This primed the respondents in the treatment group that both political and non-political content could be censored. This also means that respondents in the treatment group are exposed to twice as many censored articles as those in the control group. Hence, the treatment reflects both dilution and repeated exposure laid out in the theory.

Table 2 summarizes when and where the censorship label occurred in the treatment and control groups. The difference between the treatment and control groups is that respondents in the treatment group were exposed to additional censorship of three non-political articles.

[7]The purpose of the screenshot is to convince the participants that these articles are real WeChat articles. The screenshot only includes the first couple lines and does not reveal the full content of the article. All ten articles are real WeChat articles censored by WeChat. I selected these articles from the WeChatScope dataset used in the observational study. The selection process was systematic. I first randomly drew twenty articles from the dataset and then selected ten out of the twenty articles which I deemed as appropriate for the experiment.

Figure 2: Example Article with and without Censorship Label (The Red Exclamation Mark) in the Experiment

Notes: The censorship label reads: This article was blocked by WeChat due to violation of Internet law.

Labeled articles remained constant across subjects in respective groups, though as mentioned, their orders were randomized (i.e. labeled articles might occur at any position). The details of the ten articles can be found in Online Appendix C.

Measurement

The main dependent variables of the study are backlash against the censorship policy and backlash against the regime. To measure backlash against the censorship policy, I first asked a straightforward question about respondents' *support for government control of the Internet*. However, asking straightforward questions in authoritarian regimes might induce social desirability bias and potentially underestimate treatment effects. Hence, I asked two additional questions on censorship policy. The second question about policy backlash asks

Table 2: Explanation of Treatment

	Government or Collective Action	Control Group (Political Censorship)	Treatment Group (Normalized Censorship)
Article 1	No		Censorship Label
Article 2	No		Censorship Label
Article 3	No		Censorship Label
Article 4	No		
Article 5	No		
Article 6	No		
Article 7	Yes	Censorship Label	Censorship Label
Article 8	Yes	Censorship Label	Censorship Label
Article 9	Yes	Censorship Label	Censorship Label
Article 10	Yes		

Notes: The difference between the treatment and control groups is that the treatment group were exposed to additional censorship of three non-political articles. Column 1 indicates whether each of the articles is political or non-political. Both groups read the titles of all ten articles. In the control group, article 7, 8, and 9 (all political) were labeled as censored, whereas in the treatment group, article 1, 2, 3, 7, 8, and 9 (three political and three non-political) were labeled as censored. The order of the articles was randomized in both groups.

respondents whether they think *government control of the Internet is normal*. This question also directly tests the normalization theory that claims citizens will accept a coercive policy as normal. Finally, I asked about their *perception of censorship volume*. If respondents perceive censorship volume as too high, they might think that current censorship is too excessive and hence prefer less stringent censorship, and vice versa. Despite encountering twice as many censorship labels, I expect the treatment group to express a lower perception of censorship volume and prefer more censorship than the control group.

To measure backlash against the regime, I directly borrowed questions measuring *assessment of the government*, *overall satisfaction of China*, and *willingness to participate in protests* from Huang (2018). Similar to the policy backlash questions, the questions about regime backlash include both straightforward measure of regime support and more indirect measure of overall satisfaction. Higher support and overall satisfaction indicate a lower level of regime backlash. For assessment of the government, I asked separately about central and local governments. Because discussing local government is less sensitive than central gov-

ernment, it alleviates potential social desirability bias and ceiling effects problems. For the last question, I expect respondents in the treatment group to be less willing to participate in protest. However, this is not because of fear and outright intimidation from the regime (Huang 2018; Young 2019). Instead, citizens become more supportive of the regime and less willing to protest due to a sincere belief that censorship is normal and the government is for the people. Table 3 summarizes the wording of each question and the expected direction of treatment effects.

Table 3: Measurement of Main Outcome Variables

Hypothesis	Survey Items	Expectation
Policy Backlash	Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: The government should actively control the Internet and remove content that it deems inappropriate.	+
	Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: For most of the time, the current government's control of the Internet are normal and justified.	+
	Do you think the level of Internet control in China is too high, too low, or about right?	−
Regime Backlash	Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Our central government always works for the people and serving their needs.	+
	Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Our local government always works for the people and serving their needs.	+
	How satisfied are you with the overall situation in China right now?	+
	If there is a gathering of people or "collective walk" over the work of the government in your area, would you participate in it?	−

Notes: All individual survey items were measured on a five-point scale, with 5 indicating "Strongly Agree," "Very Satisfied," or "Very Likely." For question 3 of policy backlash, 5 indicates "Way too high," 3 indicates "About right," and 1 indicates "Way too low." The order of the questions was randomized.

Because I use multiple items to measure the same dependent variables, it might introduce bias due to multiple hypothesis testing. I address this concern by presenting p-values that are adjusted using the most conservative Bonferroni correction in which the p-values are multiplied by the number of tests.

I use nine covariates to check the balance between the treatment and control groups.

They are also included in the regression analyses. Among the nine covariates, four are demographic variables, including *Age*, *Income*, *Female*, and *Education*. The remaining five covariates are *Pro-Market Ideology*, *Party Member*, *Political Interests*, *Social Media Usage*, and *VPN Usage*, which measure participants' political predispositions and Internet usage. All covariates are balanced between the treatment and control groups and none of them significantly predicts treatment assignment. Hence, the randomization process is successful. Details of the balance table is reported in Online Appendix A.

Results

Table 4 reports the two-tailed t-test results comparing the control and treatment groups on individual survey items. For attitudes toward censorship policy, the treatment significantly increases respondents' support for government control of the Internet ($\beta = 0.264$, $p < 0.01$) and their beliefs that censorship is normal ($\beta = 0.243$, $p < 0.01$). Both results indicate that the range of censorship targets matters for public reactions toward censorship. Additional exposure to non-political censorship reduces respondents' backlash against censorship policy even if they are also exposed to political censorship. By contrast, the treatment effect on respondents' perception of censorship volume is insignificant but in the correct direction ($\beta = -0.105$, $p = 0.34$). The insignificant result is perhaps because responses concentrated on the median choice – "About Right" – whereas few respondents chose "Too High" or "Too Low."

For attitudes toward the regime, exposing respondents to censorship of both political and non-political content increases their support for both central ($\beta = 0.236$, $p < 0.01$) and local governments ($\beta = 0.288$, $p < 0.01$), their overall satisfaction of China ($\beta = 0.229$, $p < 0.01$), and decreases their willingness to protest ($\beta = -0.268$, $p < 0.05$). The effect sizes are large given the fact that baseline support for the regime is already high in the control group. The average support for the central government in the control group is 3.96 out of 5, and support for local government in the control group is 3.69 out of 5. As such, the effect sizes of

Table 4: Two-Tailed t-tests Comparing Control and Treatment Groups on Individual Survey Items

Hypothesis	Survey Items (Theoretical Expectations)	Control (n = 307)	Treatment (n = 305)	Mean Diff ($T - C$)	t-stats	Adjusted p-value
Policy Backlash	Support for Gov't Control (+)	3.353 (0.191)	3.617 (0.207)	0.264 (0.082)	−3.201	0.004
	Censorship is Normal (+)	3.681 (0.210)	3.924 (0.225)	0.243 (0.076)	−3.209	0.004
	Perceived Censorship Volume (−)	2.940 (0.168)	2.836 (0.162)	−0.105 (0.066)	1.584	0.341
Regime Backlash	Assessment of Central Gov't (+)	3.957 (0.226)	4.193 (0.240)	0.236 (0.071)	−3.316	0.004
	Assessment of Local Gov't (+)	3.686 (0.210)	3.973 (0.228)	0.288 (0.080)	−3.582	0.001
	Overall Satisfaction of China (+)	3.860 (0.220)	4.089 (0.234)	0.229 (0.073)	−3.132	0.007
	Willingness to Protest (−)	2.895 (0.165)	2.627 (0.150)	−0.268 (0.102)	2.638	0.034

Notes: All individual survey items were measured on a five-point scale. Bonferroni corrections were used to correct the p-value for multiple hypothesis testing.

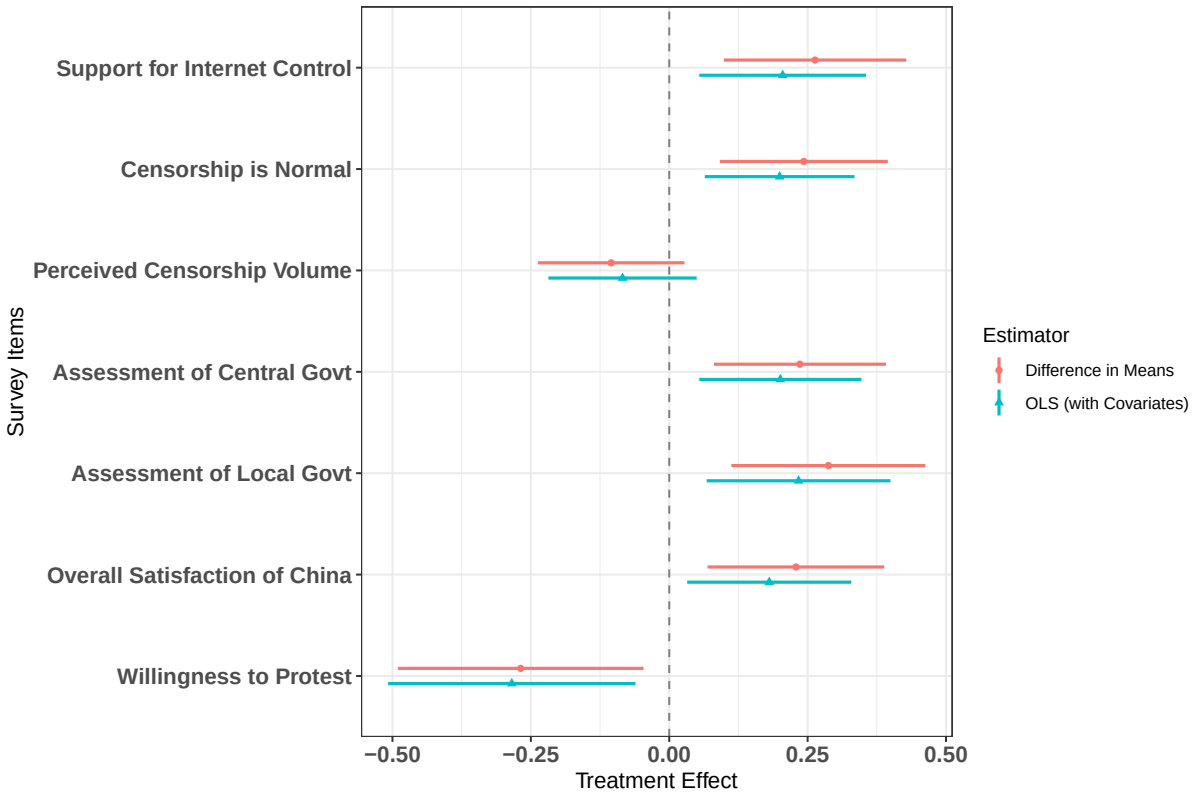
0.236 and 0.288 are both substantial increases in regime support and substantial decreases in regime backlash.

A noteworthy point is that respondents are both more supportive of the government and less willing to participate in protests. Hence, it differs from traditional threats of repression or showcase of regime strength which would lead to lower regime support and lower willingness to protest (Huang 2018; Wang 2019). It is not the case that participants in the treatment group are less willing to protest against the regime due to fear of repression. Instead, it is the result of the sincere belief that censorship is normal and the government is for the people, which is indicated by an increase in policy and regime support.

Figure 3 reports additional results of OLS regression models with control for covariates. The 95% confidence intervals are adjusted for multiple hypothesis testing by Bonferroni corrections. The regression results are consistent with the t-tests and support both the policy backlash hypothesis and the regime backlash hypothesis.

The implications of the experimental results are three-fold. First, the results confirm

Figure 3: Treatment Effect of Additional Non-Political Censorship on Individual Survey Items with 95% Confidence Interval (t-tests & OLS Regressions with Covariates Control)



Notes: All individual survey items were measured on a five-point scale. Nine covariates were included in the OLS regression models. All 95% confidence intervals were adjusted for multiple hypothesis testing by Bonferroni corrections.

that expanding the range of censorship targets beyond politically threatening content to seemingly harmless non-political content is an effective strategy to reduce backlash induced by political censorship. The Chinese government's effort in expanding and emphasizing the non-political aspect of its censorship policy seems to be a plausible explanation of why most Chinese citizens are apathetic or supportive of the censorship policy. When exposed to non-political censorship, citizens update their beliefs about censorship and are more likely to view censorship as normal rather than repressive. As a result, support for both censorship and the regime increases.

Second, the results show that repressive policies like censorship might be popular and can increase regime support. This suggests that normalization is an independent government

strategy different from persuasion, which highlights the achievements of the government, and repression, which showcases regime strength.

Third, the results imply that citizens might react differently toward different types of censorship. As a result, we need to specify the type of censorship when discussing citizens' awareness of government censorship. Currently, increasing censorship awareness is regarded as an important way to counter government censorship (Roberts 2020). However, in this experiment, increasing exposure to censorship activities leads to higher support for censorship and the regime. Hence, revealing the repressive nature, rather than increasing censorship awareness, should be a more effective way to counter government censorship. Combining the results from the survey experiment and the observational study, I show that the normalization strategy both exists in China and is effective in desensitizing the public to censorship.

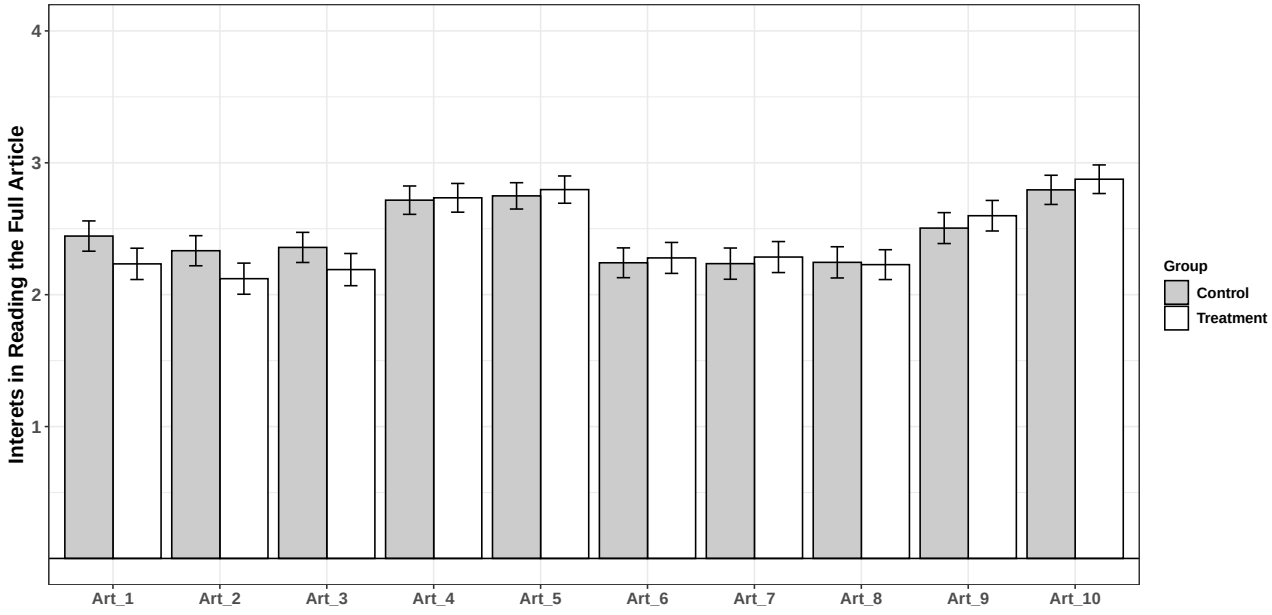
Discussion: Scope Condition for Normalization

How generalizable are the experimental results to other non-political censorship? There are two aspects of this question. First, does normalization only happen when censorship applies to non-political content that is "inappropriate" or unreasonable? Perhaps those articles in the experiment are too ludicrous, fraudulent, or otherwise unreasonable. In that case, respondents were not desensitized to censorship per se, but rather thought these articles deserved to be censored.

I address this concern by first consulting a panel of China scholars about the article titles. None of them thinks that any of the article titles is absurd enough that it "deserves to be censored." I also use respondents' interest in reading the full article as a proxy for whether the articles are reasonable. After reading each article title, respondents answered whether they were interested in reading the full article. If an article is particularly sensationalist, fraudulent, or otherwise unreasonable, then this would be reflected in an unusually outlying level of interest from the average respondent. Figure 4 shows respondents' interest in each

of the ten articles used in the experiment. Although their interest in reading the full article varies, indicating some articles are more interesting than others, none of the articles is exceptionally boring or ludicrous. The level of interest remains fairly constant across the ten articles in the experiment. Hence, the normalization process does not require the censored content to be "inappropriate" or unreasonable.

Figure 4: Respondents' Interests in Different Articles Used in the Experiment



Notes: Respondents answered whether they were interested in reading the full article right after they read each of the article titles. In some cases, they also saw a censorship label with the title (See table 2). Their interests were measured on a four-point scale. The differences between treatment and control groups are significant for article 1, 2, and 3, but insignificant for the remaining seven articles.

Second, do *all* non-political censorship activities have the normalizing effect similar to the experimental results? Will non-political censorship ever backfire? Intuitively, censoring popular non-political content such as trending entertainment shows is likely to cause backlash. In fact, it is well established in the political science literature that people care more about non-political issues like sports and entertainment than political issues (Carpini and Keeter 1996). Therefore, it is logical to argue that censoring popular non-political topics might lead to even larger backlash than censoring political topics. Consistent with this

logic, Hobbs and Roberts (2018) find that the Chinese government's blocking of Instagram, a primarily non-political social media platform, inspired millions of Chinese users to acquire virtual private networks to bypass censorship and subsequently get access to forbidden political information. Clearly, blocking the popular social media platform backfires even if it is primarily non-political.

In summary, although censoring "inappropriate" or unpopular content can effectively win support for censorship (Esberg 2020), the normalization theory does not require the censored non-political content to be particularly "inappropriate" or unreasonable. Censoring ordinary non-political content will still have the normalizing effects postulated in the theory and supported by the experimental results. However, not *all* non-political censorship activities will have normalizing effects. Some non-political censorship will backfire as well. Such backlash is particularly likely when the censored non-political content is popular among the users. Hence, there are still strategic considerations in choosing *which* non-political topics to censor. This remains for future research to explore.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this article, I asked why existing literature that claims censorship awareness will lead to backlash cannot explain the reality that a majority of Chinese citizens are either apathetic or supportive of the Chinese government's censorship policy. I pointed out that these existing studies primarily focus on censorship of government criticism and collective action, whereas the targets of censorship might be much broader. Building on the desensitization theory in psychology, I argue that when the range of censorship is expanded beyond politically threatening content to seemingly harmless apolitical topics, citizens are more likely to view censorship as normal and not react as intensely and negatively. In other words, they are desensitized to censorship activities when censorship is normalized.

The experimental and observational evidence that I presented confirms my theory and

shows that normalization of censorship happens in China and the government attempts to create an apolitical and benevolent image of censorship policy to downplay the potentially unpopular political censorship. Moreover, such a strategy is effective at the individual level. Citizens exposed to normalized censorship that applies to both political and non-political content display significantly less backlash against both the censorship policy and the regime. One important limitation of my current experimental study is that I am unable to distinguish the effect of having a broader range of censored topics and the effect of increasing the frequency of censorship activities. Future studies should seek to identify the effectiveness of dilution and repeated exposure independently.

The normalization theory can also be applied beyond China. Many authoritarian regimes employ similar strategies of dilution and repetition, to justify their censorship apparatus and desensitize their citizens to information control. For example, Esberg (2020) shows how Pinochet's Chile and other right-wing Catholic dictatorships like military-run Argentina and Franco's Spain censored non-political content in addition to political content. By including content the Catholic Church opposed among its censorship targets, Pinochet's regime not only avoided backlash, but instead won support from conservative groups.

Besides censorship, normalization theory also provides an effective explanation of the phenomenon that some repressive policies in authoritarian regimes cause outcries and widespread attention in Western media whereas most people in the authoritarian regime do not have strong reactions to them. For example, Western media has widely reported on China's digital surveillance system powered by millions of digital cameras in almost every corner of major Chinese cities. Similar concerns of surveillance are raised about China's social credit system and mandatory coronavirus tracing app. Yet Chinese citizens do not seem to be bothered much about all the surveillance. On one hand, the primary purpose of these surveillance systems is to prevent crime and ensure public safety, whereas repression of dissent only happens occasionally. This leads most Chinese citizens to believe that these surveillance systems are benevolent. On the other hand, Chinese citizens encounter these surveillance systems every

day. CCTV cameras can be seen on almost every street. Repeated exposure has effectively desensitized them, and these surveillance systems that cause outcries in the Western world are just part of the normal life in China.

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