The formation of an agonistic public sphere: Emotions, the Internet and news media in China

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Abstract: This article discusses the importance of emotions to China's public life and the way in which the Internet and news media channels have publicized emotional outbursts by the public in China in recent years. An agonistic public sphere is being formed, which pivots on the expression of emotions, especially hatred, resentment, anger and compassion, both on the Internet and in the news media. As a result, conflicting interests are contested and paradoxes in society are exposed. This development is close to what radical democracy theories conceptualize as an agonistic public sphere. This emotional dimension in public life is a crucial means for China's subordinated citizens to strive to seize resources to change the current hierarchy in society. The formation of an agonistic public sphere democratizes communication processes, opens a space for public participation and gives voice to the public who are otherwise silent. The expression of emotions has the potential to break down the Chinese Communist Party's hegemony.

Keywords: Internet, (agonistic) public sphere, emotions, news media, public life, China

This article offers an understanding of the political implications of the public expression of emotions and of the role of the Internet and news media in making this function in China.[1] Looking back at events and incidents in China in recent years, it is obvious that public life in China is imbued with a sentimental quality. Public events, such as the case of Xiao Yueyue[2] and the Wenzhou high-speed train accident,[3] gave rise to emotional outbursts by a large number of online users on issues which did not

directly affect them, and which had happened to people who were not their kin. The outpouring of emotions – especially hatred, resentment, anger and compassion – over these events triggered further reflections on Chinese society. Governments, commercial corporations, and even individuals were pressurized into dealing with the problems concerned. The mainstream mass media picked up on online sentiments, allying themselves with online users in exercising the power of emotion against the powerful and privileged. If one carefully examines these cases and borrows Jasper and his collaborators' typology, one can find both reflex emotions, especially anger and hatred, which arise as a response to certain events and information, as well as moral emotions, such as compassion and outrage, which are more context-related.[4] Both types of emotion can be seen on the individual and collective levels. The increasing number of cases of this kind in recent years makes it a relevant and pertinent inquiry to understand not only how these emotions can be expressed in public in an authoritarian country but also what the expression of these emotions means to Chinese society.

This article contends that the collaboration between the Internet and news media makes the expression of such emotions possible, leading to the formation of an open public space between the state and civil society. In this public space, the Internet provides room for the public to express emotions, while news media coverage ensures that sentimental expressions reach a wider public. The space which is opened up appears to be identical to what radical democracy theories conceptualize as an agonistic public sphere, in which plural and even conflicting interests are expressed, presented and contested. In this public sphere, with the help of the Internet, once-atomized individuals are now connected and able to act as collective units, expressing their sentiments about social issues and finding resonance with other individuals' emotions and views. In contrast to the ideal of rationality, emotions become an important element in this sphere. This does not however mean that reason is lacking nor that it is unnecessary in Chinese society. At the present time, emotions have been the driving force of a variety of social movements and issues. Sentimental expressions reflect the growing resistance against social inequality and injustice and people's mounting desire to expose social problems in order to change society. The formation of an agonistic public sphere democratizes communication processes, opens a space for public participation and gives voice to the public who are otherwise silent.

Emotions and public life

The importance of emotions to public life is controversial. One prominent view is that a healthy public life should avoid emotions; the classic Habermasian concept of the public sphere is representative of such a view. Habermas sees the public sphere as an open social space that appeared during the rise of capitalism in Western Europe.[5] It is a space between government and civil society and independent of the state. The public sphere is premised on the tenets and practices of the liberal market economy, enjoys free information access, and links private domains and public authorities. Rationality,

rather than emotions, is central to this concept of the public sphere. Habermas regards rational and reasoned public discourse as a driving force for a well-functioning public sphere, where rational and critical debates on public matters through private persons' participation and deliberation build agreement across differences that would impact on policymaking.

On the other hand, however, the importance of emotions in public life has been acknowledged. Emotions are deemed to permeate political action in general and social movements in particular. Emotions come with and even drive social action, setting up goals for such action.[6] Emotions are vital in an agonistic public sphere, in contrast to the Habermasian public sphere~~, sees emotions as vital~~. The idea of the agonistic public sphere, proposed by Chantal Mouffe,[7] stresses the importance of passion in democracy.[8] For Mouffe, the public sphere provides a space where adversaries compete for hegemonic power. This contest occurs among groups of people contending for what they believe to be right. This view holds that the ideal of rationality does not match reality. From this perspective, emotions are seen as an alternative type of democratic practice. The public sphere should accommodate passions and should enable the expression of collective passions.[9] Mouffe argues that it is important to 'mobilize passions towards collective design' rather than strive for rational discussion-based consensus.[10] Similar arguments can be found in studies on the democratic role of the Internet. Researchers argue for the existence of an alternative public sphere online, which contrasts with the Habermasian public sphere placing an emphasis on rational and critical discussions.[11] Scholars have advanced the idea that contestation, emotions and even violence can be seen as a type of democratic practice of people in Western societies, with positive political possibilities, especially when the ideals of the Habermasian concept of the public sphere seem to be failing in the face of global domination by transnational corporations and corporate and political oligopolies.[12]

The above discussions reveal the two sides of the argument over whether and how emotions matter to public life. Within this larger framework, this article shifts the scenario from Western democratic societies to the Chinese non-democratic context and discusses the political implications of emotions in China.

Emotions and the Internet in China

Chinese society has seen the proliferation of emotions – in particular feelings of insecurity and injustice, anger towards and hatred of the rich and the powerful. From the 1980s' economic reform onwards, changes in the economic sector have been accompanied by social problems, such as the widening gap between the rich and the poor as well as between urban and rural areas, environmental deterioration, high living costs, rapidly rising inflation, and an ever-increasing vacuum in the welfare system.[13] These problems have made the people feel insecure and uncertain about the future of China. Beijing has tried to tackle these problems but has not been very successful. Many of these problems have become severe since the turn of the 21st

century.

There has been an increase in public resentment and anger towards the powerful and privileged. Anger is evident in most social layers, especially in the rural population, the working class and peasantry.[14] The feeling of unfairness on the part of China's 'lost generation' has magnified their resentment towards corruption, injustice and the lack of life opportunities.[15] Traditional (ancient) ways to express a feeling of injustice, such as ordinary people kneeling down to beg for justice, are often seen in public events,[16] as exemplifed by the case of Qian Yunhui.[17] Tensions exist among social groups located on different rungs of the social hierarchy and holding different views on economic reforms and the future of China, such as new leftists and rightists. The possibility for different social groups to carry out a rational dialogue under such circumstances appears slim.

The Internet has been a key site for the explicit expression of popular emotions and it has unexperienced rapid development in China since the beginning of the 21st century, under the 'cautious support' of the Chinese authorities.[18] The number of Internet users reached 618 million in December 2013.[19] A convergence between the telecom and Internet industries after 2008 has made the Internet accessible through mobile devices.[20] The decreasing cost of Internet access has lowered the entry barriers to connection to the Internet. A phenomenon unique in China – the prevalence of counterfeit mobile phones (despite issues concerning patent and copyright) – has further increased the possibilities for the poor to access the Internet via mobile devices.

The decentralized technological architecture of the Internet and its Web 2.0 tools have changed the cultural conditions in which Chinese people communicate with one another and get informed. At the same time, these technologies and tools have created obstacles for the political authorities in the control of information production and dissemination. Active online communication has become a crucial part of China's public life. Although, like elsewhere, a large amount of entertainment content prevails online, the Internet in China still hosts heated discussions on sociopolitical issues. The topics of such discussions range from social injustice to all kinds of events such as the Olympic Games.

The Internet's great capacity for connectivity enables once-atomized individuals to collectively resist the dominance of certain social groups or actors. At the end of 2011, for instance, Internet users, among whom were activists, ordinary citizens and journalists, organized a networked movement – visiting Chen Guangcheng[21] – in order to get him released. In addition, the Internet also offers a platform where users can make good use of social resources for certain purposes. Two prominent examples of this are the 'Free lunch for children' (免费午餐) and the 'Microblogs combat child-trafficking' (微博打拐) campaigns,[22] which were launched on the social media platform microblogs (微博, the Chinese version of Twitter). The two campaigns helped poor children in rural areas and pushed the police to deal with the problem of kidnapping in 2011.

Cyberspace allows individuals to express their interests and feelings about issues affecting society. Enjoying the advantages offered by the Internet, such individual

expressions can stir up collective sentiments, especially with the help of members of the elite. In particular, the disadvantaged and underprivileged, such as peasants, laid-off workers, migrant labour and residents whose houses are threatened with demolition or already demolished, lack access to mainstream media outlets such as newspapers, magazines and broadcasters. Having access to the Internet enables them to express private interests and to obtain publicity. Publicity of this kind may snowball individual feelings of injustice into collective sentiments; the public sharing of certain experiences can generate moral emotions such as compassion and outrage. The case of Qian Minqi[23] is a prominent example. After 10 years of fruitless attempts to obtain justice, Qian Mingqi, an unemployed man whose home was illegally demolished by the local authority, taught himself to use the Internet and established profiles on social media sites. In doing so, he made public the injustice he had experienced and hoped to get help from those who were more powerful and had more resources than himself, such as lawyers and journalists.[24] Such expressions of individual experience can easily strike a collective chord among Internet users who share the same feelings about certain social groups or institutions, such as local governments, civic officials and the rich. The stirring of online public sentiment is especially obvious when there are issues involving injustice and conflicts between the powerless and the powerful.[25] Online hatred by the powerless towards the powerful and privileged can even construct a logic that sees sociopolitically disadvantaged individuals as heroes and the advantaged as villains. For instance, around half of the messages about the case of Qian Mingqi expressed doubts, anger and hatred.[26] After the bombing carried out by Qian Mingqi in 2011, in which he died, the followers of his microblog account rapidly increased to 30,000, while both Internet users and passersby at scene of the bombing hailed Qian's violent act.[27] In cyberspace, Qian is emotionally and schematically labelled a 'hero' or 'warrior' who dared to oppose authority in public. A simple search using the keyword 'Qian Mingqi' on microblogs would easily reveal many posts with sentiments similar to this:

> For those who applauded Yang Jia's killing of policemen three years ago,[28] they would applaud Qian Mingqi and Xia Junfeng[29] again today, calling them heroes. 'Being not afraid to die' is the last powerful weapon the powerless can adopt to protest against the powerful: either votes or dynamite.

In fact the same situation had happened during the case of Deng Yujiao[30] back in 2009. Public anger towards officials underlie the online public's interpretation of these events.[31] Indeed, individuals' strong emotions, especially anger or hatred towards the rich and powerful, prevail online and become prominent collective sentiments. As a result, emotional expressions and conflicting sentiments rather than rational deliberative discussions characterize China's Internet communication.[32]

When emotions are stirred or heated, the distinction between public and private domains on the Internet is often blurred. In daily use, a considerable number of Chinese Internet users appear to have no qualms about revealing private information about themselves and others online, turning cyberspace into an intimate space. The

boundaries of the online private sphere are broken down when such private information attracts extensive attention from other Internet users or is actually hunted down by Internet users who engage in 'human flesh search' (人肉搜索)[33] which leads to more exposure of private matters to the public. It is not unusual to see individuals' private personal posts forwarded indiscriminately by Internet users, leading to private issues escalating into public affairs and involving popular emotional outbursts. The case of Guo Meimei[34] in 2011 is an excellent example of this. Internet users stumbled across private information about her luxurious lifestyle that she had published online. They became sceptical of the sources of her wealth, tapping into collective anger about corruption. These doubts drove the offline news media to pay more attention to this case. The coverage in the news media led to official investigations into some officials and departments.

Ironically, such popular emotional outbursts and breaches of privacy and have even become a powerful weapon to be used to crack down corruption. From Zhou Jiugen[35] in 2008 to Yang Dacai[36] in 2012, casual news photos of them first revealed that they wore luxury watches and smoked expensive cigarettes. The subsequent human flesh search by Internet users revealed that they owned many luxury watches which they would have been unable to afford on their salary. These findings triggered Internet users' anger and hatred towards corruption and corrupt officials. The scandal brought those officials down: in both cases the two officials stepped down less than one month after their exposure online. In some cases attacks on corruption are largely the result of disclosure of corrupt officials by their mistresses, and Internet users' anger in response to such disclosures. A prominent example is the case of Lei Zhengfu, a local official in Chongqing. Iin 2012, his mistress revealed details of his private life and she posted sex videos online. He was removed from his position and later arrested and sentenced for corruption.

In addition, the online expression of emotions reflects a plurality of social discourses which may be conflicting. The contestation of discourses is obvious on occasions involving individuals or groups who hold different views about socio-political issues. For example, it is not unusual to see China's leftists (who support the CCP's orthodox auhoritarian rule and oppose commercialization) and rightists (who support the idea of political reform and marketization) abuse each other in cyberspace. They often use abusive, profane and irrational language, in spite of the fact that many are intellectuals such as university professors. In 2012, for example, during a famous online debate between leftists and rightsts, a university professor criticized two leftists who supported the CCP by making the following comments on SinaWeibo: 'who will continue to support such an evil regime. Kong Qingdong and Sima Nan, these sons of bitches endlessly whitewash and polish the image of such a villain. Conscienceless, shameless and savage!'. Though such conflicts are often characterized by little exchange of ideas and without reaching any consensus, they do reflect the plurality of public opinion on some important issues, such as political reform in China. These diverse views, by contrast, are absent from coverage by the traditional media.

Channelling emotions by the news media

The Internet offers a platform for the release of emotions, whereas China's traditional media outlets are unlikely to function as outlets for exploring these wider social processes and feelings. This is firstly because the Chinese media continue to stay under the control of the party, in spite of commercialization. Media marketization has not resulted in media liberalization.[37] Despite the proliferation of commercial media outlets, media content is constrained by restrictions on reporting. Some avant-garde genres of journalism, such as investigative journalism, which have emerged give attention to sociopolitical issues. Nevertheless, the journalistic autonomy they enjoy is quite limited. Social anger and resentment are among the topics which are taboo.

Moreover, the news media in China pursue maximal profits,as they do elsewhere. This echoes Habermas's pessimistic view of the mass media functioning as the public sphere in a commercial context. After 30 years of media commercialization, the Chinese media market is now in the hands of dozens of gigantic state-owned media corporations, such as the Nanfang Daily Press Group and the Shanghai Media Group. The imperative to maximize profits drives the media to take into account the interests of their advertisers and subscribers, as well as that of the state. Social groups who have cause for resentment towards dominant social elites are usually neither advertisers' target consumers nor the media's subscribers. For example, a deputy editor-in-chief of a metropolitan daily complained in 2012 that no advertisers wanted to sponsor their reports on migrant workers, because on the one hand, advertisers thought migrant workers were not their target consumers and on the other they were not willing to publish their advertisements alongside reports on such a politically sensitive topic.

The dysfunctional nature of China's news media in reporting on these public sentiments is also associated with the elitism of Chinese journalists and their position in cultural production. Chinese journalists are part of a university-educated cultural elite, members of whom have a monopoly over the production and distribution of cultural products. They are therefore intellectuals with arbitrary symbolic power, according to Garnham's definition.[38] Because of improved economic conditions, they have become part of the middle class that has recently emerged in Chinese society.[39] Using Gramsci's idea of the 'organic intellectual',[40] the elitism of Chinese journalists prevents them from becoming organic intellectuals of the lower social classes who speak for the latter's rights and in their best interests. Taking these factors together, the traditional media in China are unlikely to be able to channel the emotions of social groups who oppose the ruling class in order to challenge the status quo.

However, in recent years it has become noticeable that some commercial news media value such online stories. They insist that their journalists investigate and reinterpret these stories.[41] There were a series of influential events that began from the expression of emotion online and were later picked up by the traditional media, such as those discussed Tang and Sampson's study.[42] This is in part because of the pressure on the traditional media from the Internet.[43] The prominence of online

emotional exposure both drives and enables the news media to pick up on these episodes. Even the *People's Daily* (人民日报) has started responding to the 'public opinion' which forms online. A well-known example is that in the case of Tang Hui,[44] the microblog account of the *People's Daily* supported Tang Hui in a post on 5 August 2012 in response to online sympathy for her and anger towards the local Yongzhou government. Benefiting from the publication of this post, the party organ's microblog account attracted the most attention from Internet users since its launch in July 2012: this post was re-tweeted more than 130,000 times and received around 43,000 comments from Internet users.[45] In addition, the trend of the traditional media paying more attention to online sentiment is partly attributable to the willingness of journalists to cover public interest stories, increase journalistic autonomy in their work, and to report professionally.[46] According to journalists who have reported on the events mentioned in this article, overall there are three reasons why they think they should report on them.[47] Firstly, if an event is a hot topic online, it represents the opinions of the public, which the news media cannot afford to ignore. Secondly, most events of this kind fit news value/newsworthiness criteria, such as unpredictability, negativity, the fact that elites (such as officials) are involved, conflict, and social proximity. And finally, the Internet creates difficulties for governments who try to ban reporting on such events. Therefore opportunities arise for the development of professional, quality journalism. The expression of emotions online acts as a news hook for their reports.

As a result, there is an increasing tendency for events to be first discussed heatedly and emotionally on the Internet and later reported by the traditional media, whose coverage in turn triggers more online discussions and stirs more online emotions. The interaction between Internet users and media reports often leads to an upward spiral development of events, as a deputy editor-in-chief of a commercial news magazine commented, in the case of Guo Meimei:

> ~~Weibo users~~ Microbloggers raised questions and showed scepticism about the possible relationships between Guo Meimei and Red Cross-associated enterprises, with obvious anger and hatred of corruption. Afterwards, journalists interviewed the Red Cross and commercial Red Cross-associated companies, and fed explanations and answers back to the Internet to answer microbloggers' questions. The answers and explanations published by journalists became new evidence and the basis for microbloggers' to raise further questions and vent more anger. This is a wavelike, spiral evolution of the event'.[48]

Both the Internet and the news media are indispensible for such an interaction. Without the existence of the Internet, the news media may not have been able to cover such stories. Without the coverage of the news media, however, Internet users cannot be connected with mainstream politics, and the voices of Internet users cannot reach the centres of political power. This kind of interaction has emancipatory potential in various ways. It holds the powerful accountable, and it pushes governments and officials to respond to online emotions and sentiments, as exemplified in the cases

discussed here. The expression of emotions opposes the dominant official discourse on relevant issues which supports the domination of the ruling party on the one hand, and provides more opportunities for the powerless to speak up on the other.

The formation of an agonistic public sphere

The interaction between the Internet and the news media in China takes place in the public sphere. However, this cannot really be seen as a Habermasian public sphere. Firstly, a prominent aspect of the former sphere is the importance of private individuals' emotional expressions about private issues, rather than that of rational debates on public matters. The significance of emotions and private interests contrasts rationality and publicity that are at the centre of the Habermasian concept of the public sphere. Secondly, in this space, although information access is considerably easier and freer than previously, it is still inhibited by political control. Thirdly, the public discourses that are forged in this sphere are contesting one another rather than forming consensus. Finally, this sphere is not premised on differentiation of the state from the privatized/capitalist market economy, an essential aspect of Habermas's public sphere.[49] Instead, this sphere is close to an agonistic public sphere in Mouffe's terms, because of the prominence of emotions and plural and contesting discourses as well as contestation against dominant social groups and individuals.

In an authoritarian society such as China that has a strong state but a weak society, this public sphere is important sociopolitically. Emotions expressed in this space are good for China's public life as they hold the state accountable and break down the dominance of official ideology. In China, expressing emotions itself is a practice of citizenship and a nurturing of the consciousness of resistance. In this way, the 'organic' expression of emotions – especially those on the Internet – is turning the 'hidden script' of resistance into a 'public script'.[50] Individual experience is given the opportunity to come under national or even international scrunity, which might forge collective resistance against the domination of social institutions and individuals. In addition, access to social resources makes the expression of emotions powerful, as demonstrated in all the cases discussed in this article. Though the powerless and the elites are differently wired in networks and they occupy different positions and thus benefit from such networks to different degrees, members of these elites – either economic, political and cultural elites and institutions, or government departments such as the police, that are located in the central nodes of networks – are much more contactable than before. Those who are powerless now have greater access to the elite, implying the potential to organize social resources effectively to address their needs. In addition, strong emotions can formulate a plurality of discourses that contest each other and pressure authorities to act, creating the potential to change the existing power structures in a repressive society. Especially for less privileged people, who have had no chance to speak out in an era dominated by the traditional media, an agonistic public sphere comprising both cyberspace and space for the traditional media is a way for them to make their voices heard.

Public emotions of this kind are public opinions expressed in an emotional way rather than forged in the rational debates that are crucial to a successful deliberative democracy. Such sentimental public opinions embody individuals' direct or indirect personal experience, their political and social perceptions and their reflections on their own position in society. They mix both reflex and moral emotions, as described by Jasper and his collaborators.[51] The power of such emotions was shown in the case of Zhang Jinzhu[52] in 1997 as well as the case of Sun Zhigang[53] in 2003. The authorities are afraid of this type of power that is overwhelming and collective, and thus have to make changes. In this sense, emotions have their democratic functions. They are politically meaningful and should therefore not be dismissed.

However, the agonistic public sphere has its own limitations stemming from the influence of existing social and media conditions. Firstly, the traditional media respond to online emotional expressions according to their own paradigms and journalistic values, which are themselves limited. For example, an analysis of the news reports on the high-speed train accident in 2011 in the *Southern Metropolitan Daily* (南方都市报) and the *Wenzhou Metropolitan Daily* (温州都市报) reveals that the two newspapers have cited user-generated content about the high-speed train crash incident in different ways according to their own journalistic values and practice paradigms[54]. In addition, driven by the news media's commercial logic, it is possibile that reports of this kind reflect the interest of the public rather than the public interest. This possibility could lead to sensationalism and further tabloidization of the news media.

Secondly, inequalities exist in terms of Internet access, usage and effects.[55] Most Internet users in China live in cities and are well educated and well paid.[56] Migrant labourers, laid-off workers and other low-income social groups make up the information have-less in China's urban areas. How these information have-nots and have-less benefit from the Internet depends on how they use the Internet, for what purposes, how much existing resources they have in the 'real' world and what positions they occupy in the social hierarchy.[57] The effects of communication over the Internet are influenced by the existing social structure.

The Chinese government's propaganda control also extends to the virtual space through regulations, the blocking of politically sensitive online content and requirement that Internet portals and service providers exercise self-censorship.[58] In many cases, sensitive information and Web posts have been quickly removed. Bloggers who create and circulate sensitive content have been blocked and their accounts have been closed. Along with harsh measures imposed on the media since 2013, the functioning of the agonistic public sphere is precarious.

A case study of demolition and self-immolation in Yihuang

This section looks into the Yihuang incident to illustrate what has already been discussed above. This case study offers an understanding of an agonistic public sphere in action.

In 2010 in Yihuang county, three members of the Zhong family burned themselves as a protest against the local authority's plan to demolish their home by force. One died and the other two were severely injured. The local government tried to cover up the tragedy and attempted to stop Zhong Rujiu and her sister – two daughters of the family – from flying to Beijing to petition. When the local media remained silent, the tragedy was revealed on the Internet. Out-of-town media, such as the *Southern Metropolitan Daily* and the *Xiaoxiang Morning Herald* (潇湘晨报), sent their journalists to investigate. When local officials prevented Zhong Rujiu and her sister at the airport from taking a flight to Beijing, Deng Fei, an investigative journalist at the *Phoenix Weekly* (凤凰周刊), posted messages about what happened in the airport via SinaWeibo in real time. His microblogs, however, were deleted by Sina later that day. Soon afterwards, Zhong Rujiu set up her own SinaWeibo profile, posted updates about the situation in Yihuang and news of the victims, uploaded pictures and on-site audio recordings to the Internet, and appealed for help and attention from the public. Some members of the cultural and economic elites, such as Deng Fei and Pan Shiyi,[59] forwarded her messages to their large groups of followers. What the Zhong family went through triggered a great outpouring of anger by Internet users and attracted much coverage in the traditional media. Pressure generated on the Internet led to negotiations between the Zhong family and the local authority as well as the dismissal of the local governor of Yihuang county.

The Zhong family occupies a lower position in China's social hierarchy. They had few resources available for appealing for justice. They even chose to burn themselves to show their resistance against the powerful local authority. Therefore, the Zhong family was powerlessly atomized on the margins of society. After they had attracted massive attention from online users and the traditional media, the support of ordinary online users, the mass media and some members of the elite ensured that they were no longer completely powerless in the face of the authorities. With the help of the Internet, they also obtained access to resources that they would not otherwise have had. For example, microblogs helped them to seek medical support for their dying mother.[60]

Although individuals can opt to express their emotions online, not all expressions are heard by others nor can they trigger collective emotions. Such individual expressions have to draw the attention of elites in order to engage the wider society. In this case, the involvement of members of the elite, such as Deng Fei, Pan Shiyi and many others, magnified the impact of the case. When the two daughters were blocked in the airport, Deng Fei even strongly encouraged Zhong Rujiu to do what he thought might capture the attention of the public and media, using his judgement as an experienced jouranlist. The case would not have become so influential without the help and instruction of Deng Fei, since he knew what the media and the public wanted, and how to effectively use the media to produce sociocultural resonance and shape the public discourse on injustice.[61] The traditional media carried out further investigations, put all the information they collected together, and gave the wider audience the full story of what had happened and explained why. A wide range of officials, especially those at higher adminstrative levels, were interviewed and their

comments were quoted in these news reports.

The whole affair was driven by emotions, especially anger and compassion were evident in commentaries, rather than rational debate, and these were expressed in cyberspace and the traditional media. In the process, the experience of the Zhong family publicized online directly and quickly triggered the public's reflex and moral emotions in a mix of anger, compassion and hatred towards the government and officials. The following post is a typical example:

> I read the news this morning and saw this one 'demolition caused three to burn themselves in Yihuang Jiangxi, no officials and policemen on the ground tried to save them'. I cried, what kind of society is this, are they any better than bandits, are you bandits or something else? None of these fuck figures [of GDP] is associated with the sweat and blood of peasants and miners and with the tears of residents whose houses are demolished, you son of a bitch, I fuck you.

The poster expressed his/her strong sympathy for the victims and disadvantaged people as well as vitriolic anger towards governments, officials and policemen, including the use of swear words.

Such reflex and moral emotions have roots in the context of Chinese society. In recent years, demolition has become a pressing issue that has increasingly pitted fiercely resistant residents defending their homes against highly determined officials, embodying injustices that every ordinary Chinese person may encounter in daily life.[62] The Yihuang incident thus was sociocultural resonant event in itself, let alone the sad loss of life, which easily triggered human compassion. Zhong Jiuru's creative use of texts and audio recordings on the Internet, which vividly displayed victims' fear and local authorities' brutality, also effectively created sociocultural resonance with other Internet users. On this score, the Internet functioned to broadcast live what happened in Yihuang dramatically through words, pictures and audio recordings on screen. Coverage by the traditional media, such as the publication of the previously beautiful but now dreadful images of the victims' terribly burned faces, and reports on their suffering and the brutality of local officialdom, further added credibility to, and even endorsed, the descriptions of the case provided by journalists and by the Zhong family on the Internet.

Nevertheless, the bottom-up push from society in this agonistic public sphere has in practice encountered barriers in the real world. Political and institutional interference and the stubbornness of the political authorities were the two main constraining factors. For its part, Sina practised self-censorship: the commercial portal's response to a request from the state was to delete relevant microblogs and close down accounts. In addition, and more fundamentally, despite the fact that local politicians were dismissed in this specific case, the reality of the frequent demolitions affecting people in China has not changed much. What further angered the public was that the governors of Yihuang county, who were dismissed in 2010 because of this case, were reappointed to other political positions in 2011, which the media described as 'another element that arouses the anger of the public'.[63]

This case – as well as other cases discussed in this article – expressed and triggered a feeling of insecurity among Chinese citizens and their scepticism of the authorities' motives and commitment to justice.[64] It also reflects the resistance of the powerless against the dominant powers in the Chinese system. The Internet and news media have faciliated such resistance. In this case, we can see the agonistic public sphere in action and the roles of different actors – the Internet, news media, journalists and the public.

Conclusion

This article has reviewed China's public life in recent years and evaluated the importance of the Internet and news media in channelling the expression of emotions. The concept of an agonistic public sphere is applicable to the case of China. In this public sphere, conflicting interests and emotions are contested and paradoxes in society are exposed. The prevalence of emotions has become a need as well as an indicator for the formation of the public sphere.

Emotions accumulated in the course of economic reform urgently need a platform for expression and to be released. The traditional media alone, however, are unlikely to fulfil these needs, due to limitations inherent in their role as instruments of propaganda. Meanwhile in spite of offering more space and opportunities for ordinary people to express their views and emotions, online virtual space on its own is isolated from the dominant social and political fields. In a public sphere where both the Internet and traditional media are present, the expression and exploration of emotions provides the potential and means for ordinary people to challenge the hegemonic position of authorities, powerful individuals and institutions.

Faciliatated by the Internet, Chinese people from lower social positions are able to seize certain opportunities to practise the 'arts of resistance' in public space.[65] The Internet connects atomized individuals and unites them, pouring their invididual power into the collective pool. For those who have the knowledge and are willing to to use the Internet, they have the opportunity to organize and integrate fragmented social resources into a whole. They are able to air their angry feelings about injustices, mock the authorities, and salute grass-roots heroes such as Chen Guangcheng. Meanwhile, the involvement of the traditional media facilitates online communication with a wider audience. By conducting investigations into topical issues as well as interviews with relevant actors involved, the traditional media can bring attention to and utilize the information gathered and emotions expressed on the Internet and direct these to the attention of political leaders at the top.

Such a practice of resistance makes a contribution to breaking down what Giddens calls the 'naturalization of the present'.[66] When the Chinese people neither recognize the ideological values propagated by the CCP nor accept the current situation as their destiny, the CCP is in danger of losing its hegemony. This is a way to denaturalize the power hierarchy, in which emotions function as a sort of link and bond among Chinese online users. In cases which resonate with online users, the

resulting public outcries can mobilize people to express their feelings on social issues. Such mobilization not only offers discourses different from those in the traditional media, but also puts pressure on the powerful and privileged to change the status quo.

Of course, the effects of an agonistic public sphere vary from case to case as well as from time to time, due to the limitations imposed by existing conditions, such as reporting restrictions, Internet users' skills and willingness to use new media technologies, as well as their actual social positions. Whether and to what extent the expression of emotions and the creation of an agonistic public sphere can lead China to a healthy democracy is therefore uncertain.

Notes

I owe a great debt to Professor Colin Sparks, who initiated and discussed with me the idea of the importance of emotions in China's public life after my seminar at Hong Kong Baptist University in 2012. I have benefited from his thoughts and insights on this topic.

[1] The empirical materials in this article are drawn from the following: 42 interviews conducted from 2011-2012, with Chinese newspaper journalists responsible for covering discussions on the Internet or journalists who reported on the cases discussed in the article, their directors, managers of China's major Internet portals such as Sina, and Internet activists regarding the activities and interests of Internet users; and a retrospective analysis of prominent public events and incidents in recent years. All interviewees preferred to remain anonymous.

[2] Eighteen passers-by did not stop to save two-year-old Xiao Yueyue when she was run over by two cars. Her death caused an outpouring of anger by online users and was soon extensively reported in the mainstream media. The question that was repeatedly raised was whether China had lost its conscience since the economic reforms.

[3] The suspected cover-up by the authorities and their actions in preventing the media from reporting the case of the train crash sparked an enormous public fury especially on the Internet. The authorities had to respond to the problems in the rescue efforts and compensation identified by online users and the mainstream media.

[4] James M. Jasper, The Emotions of Protest: Affective and Reactive Emotions in and around Social Movements. *Sociological Forum,* 13 (3), 1998: 397-424; Jeff Goodwin, James Jasper, and Francesca Polletta, Emotional dimensions of social movement, in David Snow, Sarah Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi (eds) *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movement*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004:611-635.

[5] Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transfromation of the Public Sphere*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989.

[6]James M. Jasper, "The Emotions of Protest: Affective and Reactive Emotions in and around Social Movements," *Sociological Forum* 13(3), 1998; Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper, "Emotions and Social Movements," in *Handbook of the Sociology of Emotions*, ed. Jan E. Stets and Jonathan H. Turner, New York: Springer, 2007; and Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, and Francesca Polletta, eds.,

Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001.

[7] Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, London: Routledge, 2005.

[8] Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, London: Routledge, 2005; Nico Carpentier and Bart Cammaerts, "Hegemony, Democracy, Agonism and Journalism: An Interview with Chantal Mouffe ", *Journalism Studies,* 7 (6), 2006.

[9] Hallvard Moe, "Online Media Participation and the Transformation of the Public Sphere: Moving Beyond the Fragmentation Debate," in *the AoIR conference Internet Research 10.0 – Internet: Critical,* Milwaukee, WI, USA. 2009.

[10] Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, London: Routledge, 2005

[11] Michael E Gardiner, "Wild Publics and Grotesque Symposiums: Habermas and Bakhtin on Dialogue, Everyday Life and the Public Sphere," *The Sociological Review* 52, 2004.

[12] For example, Luke Goode, Alexis McCullough, and Gelise O'Hare, "Unruly Publics and the Fourth Estate on Youtube,", *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies,* 8(2), 2011; Mervi Pantti and Johanna Sumiala, "Till Death Do Us Join: Media, Mourning Rituals and the Sacred Centre of the Society," *Media, Culture & Society* 31(1), 2009; and Lincoln Dahlberg, "Rethinking the Fragmentation of the Cyberpublic: From Consensus to Contestation," *New Media & Society* , 9(5), 2007.

[13] John W. Lewis and Xue Litai, "Social Change and Political Reform in China: Meeting the Challenge of Success," *The China Quarterly* 176, 2003: 926-942; Richard Baum, "China after Deng: Ten Scenarios in Search of Reality," *The China Quarterly* 145, 1996: 153-175.

[14] Martin King Whyte, *Myth of the Social Volcano: Perceptions of Inequality and Distributive Injustice in Contemporary China*, Standford: Strandford University Press, 2010; Pun Ngai and Huilin Lu, "Unfinished Proletarianization: Self, Anger, and Class Action among the Second Generation of Peasant-Workers in Present-Day China," *Modern China*, 36(5), 2010: 493-519.

[15] Chunping Han and Martin King Whyte, "The Social Contours of Distributive Injustice Feelings in Contemporary China," in *Creating Wealth and Poverty in Postsocialist China*, ed. Deborah S. Davis and Wang Feng, Standford: Standford University Press, 2009; Gordon G. Chang, *The Coming Collapse of China*, London and Sydney: Arrow, 2002.

[16] Dajin Li, "weiguan yueqing guancha tuan (Observing 'Yueqing Observation Group)'," *nandu zhoukan* (Southern Metropolis Weekly), 12, January 2011, http://www.nbweekly.com/news/observe/201101/13269.aspx, accessed 1 December 2013.

[17] Qian Yunhui, a village head in Yueqing County, led villagers to petition against local officials who were allegedly involved in corrupt land dealings. Qian died after he was crushed by a truck in 2010. Villagers suspected he was killed by the local authority.

[18] Jason Abbott, "Democracy@Internet.Asia? The Challenges to the Emancipatory Potential of the Net: Lessons from China and Malaysia," *Third World Quarterly*, 22 (1), 2001.

[19] Di 33 ci Zhongguo huliang wangluo fazhan zhuangkuang tongji baogao (The 33rd Statistic Report of Internet Development in China), 5 March 2014, http://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/hlwtjbg/201403/t20140305_46240.htm, accessed 17 July

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[21] Chen Guangcheng, a blind civil rights activist, was locked illegally in his house by the local government and escaped house arrest in 2012.

[22] The former aims to provide lunches for schoolchildren in poor areas in China. The latter is to help parents whose children were thought to have been kidnapped by traffickers. Both involve networked fundraising and the latter even has a collaboration of Internet users to look for kidnapped children and child traders.

[23] Qian Mingqi killed himself and two innocent others in the Fuzhou bombing incident in 2011.

[24] Zimeng Ling, "qian mingqi zhisi (The Death of Qian Mingqi)," *nandu zhoukan* (Southern Metropolis Weekly), 16 June 2011, http://www.nbweekly.com/news/observe/201106/26376.aspx, accessed at 1 December 2013.

[25] Interviews with 30 journalists who reported on relevant events triggered by online sentiments from 2011-2012.

[26] Yuhe Xia, " *Tufa Shijian Zhong De Weibo Yulun Jiyu Xinlang Weibo De Shizheng Yanjiu* (Weibo Communication on Emergent Events: An Empirical Study of Sina's Weibo)," *xinwen yu chuanbo yanjiu* (Journalism and Communication Study*)*, 5, 2011.

[27] Zimeng Ling, "qian mingqi zhisi (The Death of Qian Mingqi)," *nandu zhoukan* (Southern Metropolis Weekly), 16 June 2011, http://www.nbweekly.com/news/observe/201106/26376.aspx, accessed at 1 December 2013.

[28] Yang Jia killed several policemen after he was unfairly treated by the police for something which he did not do in 2008.

[29] Xia Junfeng made a living from selling food on the street after he was laid off. In 2009, he killed two civil administrators who wanted to confiscate his goods when Xia and his wife were hawking on a street.

[30] Deng Yujiao, a waitress in a spa club, killed a local official who allegedly attempted to rape her.

[31] Interviews with five journalists who reported on these cases in 2011.

[32] Also see, for example, Shubo Li, "The Online Public Space and Popular Ethos in China," *Media Culture and Society*, 32(1), 2010: 63-83; Yang Liu et al., "“The Controversy over a Teacher’s First Escape in the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake”: Exploring Folk-Mentality Reflected Via the Internet," *International Journal of Psychological Studies,* 2(1), 2010: 154-165; Guobin Yang, " Beiqing Yu Xinue Wangluo Shijian Zhong De Qinggan Dongyuan (Sadness and Irony: Emotional Mobilisation in Internet Events)," in *Xinmeiti Shijian Yanjiu* (The Study of New Media Events), ed. Linchuan Qiu and Joseph M. Chan, Beijing: zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe (Renmin University Press), 2010.

[33] Online human flesh search refers to a phenomenon in which Internet users collectively search for and expose private information concerning individuals suspected of wrongdoing. David Kurt Herold, "Human Flesh Search Engines: Carnivalesque Riots as Components of a 'Chinese Democracy'," in

Online Society in China: Creating, Celebrating, and Instrumentalising the Online Carnival, ed. David Kurt Herold and Peter Marolt, Oxon, New York: Routledge, 2011:127-145; Anne S.Y. Cheung, "A Study of Cyber-Violence and Internet Service Providers' Liability: Lessons from China," *Pacific Rim Law & Policy Journal*, 18(2), 2009: 323-346.

[34] In 2011, Guo Meimei boasted about her lavish lifestyle in her microblogs. Netizens doubted that the Red Cross funded Guo. The traditional media soon started an investigation into a possible scandal involving the Red Cross.

[35] Zhou Jiugen, a local official, was brought down for corruption by netizens who found out that Zhou was smoking very expensive cigarettes.

[36] Yang Dacai was pictured grinning at the scene of a bus crash and was seen on different occasions wearing different luxury watches. The huge backlash of anger online towards Yang resulted in his sacking.

[37] Yu Huang, "Peaceful Evolution: The Case of the Television Reform in Post-Mao China " *Media Culture and Society* 16(2), 1994: 217-241.

[38] Nicholas Granham, "The Media and Narratives of the Intellectual," *Media Culture and Society* 17(3), 1995: 359-384.

[39] Joseph Man Chan, Zhongdang Pan, and Francis L. F. Lee, "Professional Aspirations and Job Satisfaction: Chinese Journalists at a Time of Change in the Media," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 81(2), 2004: 254-273.

[40] Nicholas Granham, "The Media and Narratives of the Intellectual," *Media Culture and Society* 17(3), 1995: 359-384.

[41] This is drawn from 42 interviews conducted from 2011-2012.

[42] Lijun Tang and Helen Sampson, "The Interaction between Mass Media and the Internet in Non-Democratic States: The Case of China," *Media Culture and Society*, 34(4), 2011.

[43] This is drawn from 42 interviews conducted from 2011-2012.

[44] The 11-year-old daughter of Tang Hui was raped and forced to sell sex in 2006. The suspects got away without punishment. Tang Hui started a petition to seek for justice for her daughter from 2007 but instead received a sentence of 1.5 years of labour re-education in 2012. She finally won the lawsuit in July 2013.

[45] Renmin ribao weibo yunying shou wangmin haoping (Netizens welcome the *People's Daily* weibo account), 20 August 2012, http://tech.sina.com.cn/i/2012-08-20/05477522964.shtml, accessed 7 July 2013.

[46] This is drawn from 42 interviews conducted from 2011-2012.

[47] This is drawn from 42 interviews conducted from 2011-2012.

[48] Interview was conducted on 23 July 2011.

[49] Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: The MIT Press, 1996.

[50] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven, CT: Yale

University Press, 1990.

[51] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990; Jeff Goodwin, James Jasper, and Francesca Polletta, "Emotional Dimenstions of Social Movement," in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movement*, ed. David Snow, Sarah Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

[52] Zhang Jinzhu was sentenced to death for his hit-and-run that caused one death and injured one person as well as huge public outrage.

[53] Sun Zhigang, a university graduate who did not carry his temporary residential identity card with him, was beaten to death in custody in Guangzhou. After the *Southern Metropolitan Daily* revealed this brutal event, public sentiment led to constitutional changes.

[54] Jingrong Tong, "weibo chuanbo he zhongguo xinwen ye de renzhi quanwei (Weibo Communication and the Epistemic Authority of Chinese Journalism)," chuanbo yu shehui (The Chinese Journal of Communication and Society), 25(7), 2013: 73-101.

[55] Marina Svensson, "Voice, Power and Connectivity in China's Microblogosphere: Digital Divides on Sinaweibo," *China Information*, 28(2), 2014: 168-188.

[56] Wei Bu, "Women and the Internet in China," in *Promises of Empowerment: Women in Asia and Latin America*, ed. Jennifer Smith and Jennifer L. Troutner, Plymouth: Rowman&Littlefield Publisher, Inc., 2004.

[57] Carolyn Cartier, Manuel Castells, and Jack Linchuan Qiu, "The Information Have-Less: Inequality, Mobility, and Translocal Networks in Chinese Cities," *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 40(2), 2005.

[58] Jason Abbott, "Democracy@Internet.Asia? The Challenges to the Emancipatory Potential of the Net: Lessons from China and Malaysia," *Third World Quarterly*, 22(1), 2001; Shubo Li, "The Online Public Space and Popular Ethos in China," *Media Culture and Society*, 32(1), 2010; Jonathan Sullivan, "China's Weibo: Is Faster Different? ," *New Media & Society*, 16(1), 2014.

[59] He is the CEO of SOHU

[60] According to a news report, qiuzhu zhongjia muqing: yichang shaoshang jiuyuan de weibo luijing (A path on weibo for the medical rescue of a dying mother of the Zhong family), *xiaoxiang chenbao* (Xiaoxiang morning), 28 September 2010.

[61] Interview with a journalist, December 2011.

[62] Steve Hess, "Nail Houses, Land Rights, and Frames of Injustice on China's Protest Landscape," *Asian Survey*, 50(5), 2010: 908-926; Matthew S. Erie, "Property Rights, Legal Consciousness, and News Media: The Hard Case of the 'Toughest Nail-House in History'," *China Information*, 26(1), 2012; and Martin King Whyte, *Myth of the Social Volcano: Perceptions of Inequality and Distributive Injustice in Contemporary China*, Standford: Strandford University Press, 2010.

[63] For example, yihuang shijian beimian guanyuan qiaoran fuchu (Officials dismissed in the Yihuang case came back: dismissing meant escaping from accountability?), *nanfang dushibao* (Southern metropolitan daily), 5 December 2011.

[64] This is drawn from 42 interviews conducted from 2011-2012.

[65] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990.

[66] Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradictions in Social Analysis*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979.

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