

**Withering Gongzhi:
Cyber Criticism of Chinese Public Intellectuals**

RONGBIN HAN

hanr@uga.edu

Department of International Affairs
University of Georgia, USA

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Abstract

This article explores why the term “public intellectual” has turned into a disgraceful label in Chinese cyberspace. Through examining how netizens have constructed the negative perception of “public intellectuals,” it shows that the Internet has not only empowered regime critics, but also promoted pluralization of expression by bringing different values, beliefs and identities into contact with an unprecedented frequency and intensity. The denigration of public intellectuals illustrates the contestation between digitally expressed civility and incivility, which has yet to be sufficiently discussed. Findings in this study also suggest that “authoritarian resilience” depends on the regime’s adaptability as well as the dynamics between its supporters and challengers.

Keywords: cyber politics, public intellectuals, discourse competition, China, authoritarian resilience

When checking out NEWSMTH (newsmth.net), a popular Internet forum in China, on October 31, 2013, the author came across the following post,

Chinese language is beautiful and its beauty is embodied in many animals' names. For instance, *Fenghuang* (Chinese phoenix) hints that *gong Feng* (male *Feng*) mates with the *mu Huang* (female *Huang*); *Yuanyang* (Mandarin duck) hints that *gong Yuan* (male *Yuan*) mates with *mu Yang* (female *Yang*); and there is *Zhizhu* (spider) ... (BOSTON5, 2013, para. 1)

Dozens of users replied, some of which just laughed, others tried to decipher the punch line. Apparently, following the logic, *Zhizhu* (spider) shall hint “*gong Zhi* mate with *mu Zhu*.” As *gong Zhi* (male *Zhi*) is a homophony of public intellectuals (*gongzhi*) and *mu Zhu* (female *Zhu*) a homophony of sows (*muzhu*), the punch line becomes “public intellectuals mate with sows.”

This thread exemplifies online expression in China in a number of ways. The circulation of the joke first on Twitter-like Sina Weibo and then on NEWSMTH, demonstrates the fluidity of online expression and the fuzzy boundary between politics and entertainment. The consumption and reproduction process, particularly the collective deciphering and interpreting efforts, reveal the subjectivity, interactivity, and playfulness that feature online expression. But what really makes the joke distinctive is that it targets public intellectuals, a group known as the “conscience of society” (Goldman, 2005, 2012; Goldman & Esarey, 2008). In effect, when the *Southern People Weekly* (2004) first introduced China's top 50 “public intellectuals,” the group was positively depicted as critical intellectuals with integrity, sense of responsibility, and the courage to fight for citizens' freedoms and rights. Considering that the post appeared as a joke, it is unlikely that the thread is the result of state manipulation. More strikingly, the joke did not disturb many users: among 57 users that engaged the thread, only one was irritated, another offered a different interpretation, and all remaining users raised no objection to the apparent assault on the group.

Why do public intellectuals become the target of satiric expression online? How has the group's negative image been created and promulgated? More broadly, what are the underlying dynamics that shape the struggle over the images of "public intellectuals"? The article explores how Chinese netizens, through daily interactions, have constructed their perception of public intellectuals that is different from what is depicted by the state or pro-liberal media. It shows that the Internet has not only empowered regime critics, but brought different values, ideologies, and identities into contact, thus enabling a complex and dynamic process of discourse proliferation, norms competition, and identity contestation among multiple state and social actors. In this regard, the glorification and denigration of public intellectuals together illustrate a big picture of digitally expressed civility and incivility, which has important theoretical and practical implications, but yet to be sufficiently discussed (as the next section shows). Findings in this study suggest that the dominant "liberalization-control" framework that focuses on state control vs. social resistance is limited (Damm, 2007), and authoritarian resilience depends not only on the regime's adaptation (Nathan, 2003; Shambaugh, 2008), but also on the dynamics between its supporters and challengers.

The article employs a three-stage strategy to trace the denigration of "public intellectuals." The first stage examines the change in netizens' attitude toward public intellectuals over time. The second stage identifies the specific online communities that have contested the image of public intellectuals. The last stage investigates *how* and *why* netizens have denigrated the group through analysis of discussion threads. The three stages require different types of data and distinctive research methods. To reveal the general trend, the article compares the usage of two specific terms that are used to refer to public intellectuals—"gonggong zhishi fenzi" and "gongzhi," with the latter being the shorthand for the former—between 2004 and 2014 on newsmth.net that was formerly the campus forum of Tsinghua University (via built-in search engine), China's most popular Internet forum Tianya.cn (via Google.com), the Chinese Core Newspaper Full-Text Database which collects full-text reports from 622 Chinese newspapers since 2000 (via

cnki.net), and the state's mouthpiece the *People's Daily* and its subsidiaries (via search.people.com.cn). Though both terms are commonly used, the author's long-term observation and the coding results both show that "*gonggong zhishi fenzi*" tends to be positive or neutral while "*gongzhi*" is mostly used in a negative sense. The results are reported in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Data used for analysis at the second and the third stages were primarily from the Internet forum NEWSMTH, though additional sources such as Tianya.cn and Weibo were also used for triangulation purposes. As of May 2015, the forum has more than 500 thematic discussion boards and attracts more than 40,000 simultaneous visitors during its peak hours daily. To collect data, the author combined keyword tracing, content analysis, and online ethnographic methods. First, the author used the forum's built-in search engine to count the mentions of the term "*gongzhi*" across time and the discussion boards, which reveal not only when "public intellectuals" were denigrated, but also where the denigration took place. The author then explored specific discussion threads to reveal the micro-dynamics through which netizens construct and promulgate the negative perception of "public intellectuals."

Though the article draws on multiple sources, relying on NEWSMTH rather than more popular platforms such as Weibo as the main source limits the generalizability of this research. But this should be not a problem because (1) the goal of the article is not to make claims of representativeness, but to identify the mechanism through which public intellectuals have been denigrated; and (2) the author has also explored additional sources such as Weibo to triangulate findings here. Focusing on NEWSMTH rather than Weibo also brings several methodological benefits. First, the site provides an effective built-in search engine and an archival service, making data collection and retrieval an easier task. Second, NEWSMTH is a more manageable site for in-depth online ethnographic work than Weibo because of its smaller size. Third, Weibo, due to its popularity and influence, is much more closely monitored and controlled by the state than NEWSMTH, making the latter a better site to observe genuine spontaneous netizen activities.

Political Expression beyond Digital Hidden Transcripts

Online expression is highly political in China as it breaks the state's monopoly over mass media and empowers social actors by expanding public sphere, promoting civil society, and facilitating social mobilization (Thornton, 2008; Yang, 2003a, 2003b, 2007, 2009; Yang & Calhoun, 2007; Zheng, 2008; Zheng & Wu, 2005). Moreover, using innovative cyber language and narrative genres, or "digital hidden transcripts," dissidents and netizens have outsmarted state censorship, popularized regime-challenging voices, and broadened online politics beyond direct contests of state power (Davis & Chey, 2013; Esarey & Xiao, 2008; Herold & Marolt, 2011; Meng, 2011; Voci, 2010; Wang, 2012; Xiao, 2011; Yang, 2009, 2011, 2012).

The party-state has adapted with efforts to control online expression (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013; MacKinnon, 2009) and to use the Internet as a new tool of social management (Hartford, 2005; Schlaeger & Jiang, 2014). In the realm of propaganda, the state has innovated by embracing popular cyber culture in its ideological constructs (Lagerkvist, 2008) and by sponsoring online commentators, aka the "fifty-cent army" (*wumao dang*), to "guide" popular opinion under the guise of ordinary netizens (Han, 2015b; Hung, 2010). However, such tactics often do not work well since netizens are apathetic toward state propaganda and tend to question anyone that is potentially state sponsored (Tong & Lei, 2013). Even Internet commentators can be identified through technical, language, and behavior patterns (Han, 2015b).

Studies cited above provide abundant insights into the state-society struggle online. But the "liberalizing Internet vs. state control" framework implicit in these studies tends to downplay the richness and complexity of cyber politics in China. Evidently, the Internet has brought different values, ideologies, and identities into contact with an unprecedented frequency and intensity, not only challenging the authoritarian regime, but also affecting all involved actors in different ways. In this sense, it is crucial to overcome

the binary view of state-society dichotomy and look into dynamics within the state or the society in cyber politics. Indeed, recent studies find that rightist and leftist netizens are debating with each other, forming stable discourse patterns online (Wu, 2014). Cyber-nationalists, while showing some pro-regime tendencies, have also challenged the regime's claims to nationalist legitimacy (Gries, 2005; Shen & Breslin, 2010; Wu, 2007). Some netizens even started to voluntarily defend the regime against challengers who they believe are superficial, ignorant, and with bad intentions (Han, 2015a). These findings all show that the Internet is not an anti-regime monolith and the struggle online is more than one between the state and its challengers. Rather, there are multiple struggles that "are diffuse, fluid, guerilla-like, both organized and unorganized, and networked both internally and externally, online with offline" (Yang, 2009, p. 63). Such pluralism has implications. As Berman (1997) has shown, vigorous civil society may under certain circumstances scuttle democracy rather than strengthening democratic rule, as in the case of Weimar Germany. Likewise, the pluralization of cyberspace may incur unexpected outcomes in authoritarian regimes, especially resilient ones such as China. In particular, the rise of spontaneous pro-regime discourses and uncivil forces seem to have worked to the advantage of the party-state. Yet, with only a few exceptions (Han, 2015a; Jiang, 2016), few studies have explicitly examined such "uncivil" aspects of Chinese Internet.

Moreover, while correctly highlighting netizens' newfound role as information producers and distributors (for instance, see Esarey & Xiao, 2008; Yang, 2009), current scholarship has not paid sufficient attention to netizens' role as audiences. Online expression is as much a process of audience perceiving, interpreting, and reacting to various messages and/or actors as a process of information production and distribution. According to sociologist Erving Goffman (1959), in everyday face-to-face interaction, individuals act like actors in a theatre and have both expressions that they *give* (impressions they intend to project) and expressions that they *give off* (impressions they do not intend to project, but are received by the audience). Such an actor-audience framework can be applied to analyze online interactions (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006). Given its fluid, interactive and public nature,

online communication not only empowers various presenters, but more importantly grants audiences the power to shape a presenter's image by discussing the expressions she/he *gives* and *gives off*. Thus, consumption oftentimes is a process of interpretation and reproduction rather than passive reception. Since presenters have virtually no control over the audiences, impression management is extremely difficult, if not impossible for any presenter. So besides examining dynamics of information production and control from the supplying end (e.g., Esarey & Xiao, 2008; King et al., 2013; Schlaeger & Jiang, 2014; Yang, 2009), it is crucial to study information consumption and reproduction at the receiving end. For instance, despite its censorship capacity, the party-state has failed to achieve intended propaganda goals, precisely because it can no longer prevent citizens from interpreting sanctioned news in different or even opposite directions it propagandizes (Tang & Huhe, 2013; Tong & Lei, 2013).

It is not just the party-state that encounters difficulty in impression management. All online actors now face the same challenge. The following sections explore how pro-liberal media, the state, and netizens have contested the image of "public intellectuals," with special focus on how ordinary netizens receive and interpret expressions the group *gives* and *gives off*. This dynamic process illustrates the pluralization of values, beliefs, and identities in Chinese cyberspace.

Contesting Images of Public Intellectuals: A Brief Genealogy

The term "public intellectuals" has been used quite loosely in China, in ways that often do not overlap perfectly with how westerners understand it, i.e., as scholars who tune into current affairs and try to influence socio-political debates and/or policy. Given the repressive authoritarian regime, "public intellectuals" in China are often characterized as individuals who dare to challenge the party-state and advocate socio-political reform; their expertise and scholarly ability to engage policy are often secondary. This explains why many see outspoken actress Yao Chen as a public intellectual though she lacks the "intellectual" background. But as this article shows, different actors such as the state, pro-

liberal media, and netizens have contested the meaning of “public intellectuals.” As David Kelly (2006) argues, though many attributes could contribute to an identity, it is the recognition of this identity by oneself or by others that puts it into play politically.

When Guangdong’s *Southern People Weekly* published the first list of Chinese public intellectuals (2004), they were depicted as “intellectuals with academic background and professional qualities, activists that speak out and participate in public affairs, and idealists with critical spirits and moral undertakings.”¹ Expressions such as “integrity,” “sense of responsibility,” and “with the courage to fight the entire world for truth and conscience” were used to describe the group. To a large extent, the report represented a boundary-pushing effort by the pro-liberal media: Among the 50 “public intellectuals” included in the report, many are long-time advocates of political reform and civil liberties such as Mao Yushi, Zhang Sizhi and He Weifang (Goldman, 2005). According to Wang Yi a columnist and commentator who made to the list, “aside from a few names to dilute the political leanings ... the name list demonstrates a very clear pro-liberal orientation” (2004, para. 1),

Such portrayal of public intellectuals made the state nervous. The issue made its way to the high-profile Central Propaganda Department (CPD) meeting in November 2004, which called for rebuttal and rectification of the idea (Jiang, 2004). Answering the call, the Shanghai-based state mouthpiece *Liberation Daily*, published a commentary on November 15, claiming that “public intellectuals” is a harmful idea because it sets intellectuals against the Party and the people (Ji, 2004). With strong Party coordination, the commentary soon was reprinted in the *People’s Daily* and dozens of other state-run media outlets. On December 14, another state-run newspaper, *Guangming Daily* published a commentary by the Guangdong Provincial Research Center of Deng Xiaoping Theory and Three Represents (2004), criticizing the idea as “extremely

¹ Another pro-liberal newspaper, the *Economic Observer*, published a collection of articles on public intellectuals in February 2003 but did not attract much public attention.

dangerous” because it “carries obvious ideological inclinations, with exceeding emphasis on intellectuals as class-transcending, social-conscience bearing, and granted intervener of public affairs and watchmen for public interests.” The state also made efforts to silence public intellectuals: The CPD issued a decree in November 2004, blacklisting six public intellectuals from the state-owned press, two of which, Wang Yi and Mao Yushi were in the *Southern People Weekly* list (Reporters Without Borders, 2004).

State efforts to redefine the notion of “public intellectuals” were met with strong resistance from dissidents and liberal intellectuals. Du Guang (2004, 2005), a retired Central Party School professor, wrote several articles defending public intellectuals, describing the *Liberation Daily* commentary as “garbled” and “overbearing.” Moreover, the state’s disapproval did not prevent the idea from spreading. A reading club with multiple online outlets—the Politically Right and Economically Left Research Group (*Zhengyou Jingzuo Gongzuoshi*)—continues to select the top 100 Chinese public intellectuals annually.² The overseas dissenting website, boxun.com (2009) also started its version of top 100 Chinese public intellectuals. Even amidst popular denigration, pro-liberal media attempted to defend the group: in 2013, *Southern Metropolis Daily* called to “do justice to public intellectuals,” urging “we should encourage people to be public intellectuals and to express with independent thoughts . . .” (2013, para. 1).

The contestation between the state and the regime-critics (and perhaps between conservative and liberal factions within the state) generated little impact among ordinary netizens initially, as the concept was rarely brought up in discussion until 2011, when it suddenly popularized, and at the same time dramatically denigrated (see the next section). The time lag between state criticism launched in 2004 and popular denigration of public

² The group has a Tianya blog (zhengyijingz.blog.tianya.cn) and a Douban page (<http://www.douban.com/people/2190157/>). Both links were accessible when last retrieved on May 30, 2015. As its name suggests, the group is politically pro-liberal and economically left-leaning.

intellectuals that gained momentum in 2011 suggests that the state's efforts were ineffective, at least initially. But by late 2011, even pro-liberal media such as *Southern Metropolis Daily* had to admit that "public intellectual" had become a swear word (Zhang, 2011). A widely circulated online article titled "Home-Made Public Intellectuals: From Newbie to Master Hand" captures how many netizens see the group. Written in a satiric tone, the article says that being a public intellectual brings quite some benefits, including "controlling the moral high ground," "attacking anyone at will," "rumor-mongering freely without taking responsibility" and "receiving funds from certain democratic endowment;" meanwhile, the qualifications are minimal: one needs only "an old computer and Internet access" and "basic skills like typing, posting, micro-blogging, and photoshoping" (Duan, 2012). Besides that, "little logic or cognitive ability" but some "psychological expertise" to manipulate followers is required (Duan, 2012).

This image of public intellectuals differs from both the positive depiction by pro-liberal media and the state's recognition that criticizes their ideological inclinations. It depicts public intellectuals as incompetent, ill intentioned, and opportunistic. They have little expertise or analytical capacity, and are selfishly motivated to manipulate popular opinion for personal gains. Other than blindly attacking the government and the people, they have neither the ability nor the will to improve anything. They are inherently repressive because they would take the moral high ground and attack opponents without being held responsible.

Denigrating Public Intellectuals: When, Where, How, and Why

Why did "public intellectuals" become the target of online criticism? How have netizens constructed their perception of the group? This section addresses these questions in three steps, by examining first the change in netizens' attitudes over time, then the major online communities where public intellectuals are denigrated, and lastly the specific discussion threads that attacked the group.

To what extent was the discussion on public intellectuals driven by netizens, not state agents given the Chinese state's ability to manipulate online expression? While it is impractical to prove that posts analyzed below were all from ordinary netizens, abundant circumstantial evidence suggests so. First, as mentioned above, state criticism and online denigration of public intellectuals were asynchronous, meaning attacks on the group were unlikely entirely a result of state campaign. Second, studies suggest that state-sponsored Internet commentators (aka the "fifty-cent army") tend to focus on major social media sites and news portals such as Weibo (Han, 2015b; King, Pan, & Roberts, in press). Since NEWSMTH, though quite popular, can hardly match Weibo or Tianya in terms of influence, it is unlikely a major target of state trolls. Moreover, Internet commentators often use official rhetoric and rarely interact with other netizens. Such features drastically differ from debates over public intellectuals on NEWSMTH. In addition, discussion on public intellectuals lasted for years and spread across hundreds of boards on NEWSMTH, including non-political ones, a pattern that is incompatible with state astroturfing. In-depth online ethnographic work also allows the author to identify users who are clearly not state agents, but actively denigrated public intellectuals.

When the Trend Changes

Measuring netizens' perception is a daunting task. Fortunately, the usage of "gongzhi" and "gonggong zhishi fenzi" can serve as a direct overall indicator of how netizens' view the group. Though both terms refer to public intellectuals, "gongzhi" carries a strong negative connotation: the author and a research assistant coded 100 mentions of "gongzhi" randomly sampled from NEWSMTH between 2011 and 2014 and find that the term was used in a negative sense over 76% of the times (Cohen's kappa = 0.7556, indicating high inter-coder reliability).³ The results are consistent over the years

³ Cohen's kappa coefficient is a robust measure of inter-coder reliability that ranges from 0 (no agreement) to 1 (perfect agreement). In contrast, about 40% of the time "gonggong zhishi fenzi" is used negatively in the randomly sampled 60 mentions.

with increasing negativity: The portion of negative mentions from 2011 to 2014 was 67, 83, 84, and 84% respectively. The author further coded mentions of “*gongzhi*” in titles of threads with 30 replies or more (total 72 threads, mean number of replies = 92.9; maximum number of replies = 680) in the same period, finding that 89% (64 out of 72) of the mentions were negative and less than 3% (2 out of 72) were positive. The coding strategy is straightforward: The mentions are coded in context with coders making an overall judgement about whether the user has a negative, neutral or positive view toward “*gongzhi*.” For instance, when one says, “I feel that Xi Dada has been brainwashed by ‘*gongzhi*’,” it is coded as negative;⁴ when popular blogger Han Han says he wants “to be a stinking ‘*gongzhi*’,” it is coded as positive as he actually defended the group. The high agreement rates suggest that the coding results are reliable. Clearly, though not every mention of “*gongzhi*” is denigrating, the term can serve as a valid indicator of overall negative perception toward the group.

Table 1 summarizes the usage of “*gongzhi*” and “*gonggong zhishi fenzi*” between 2004 and 2014 from selected sources described above. The results reveal a common trend: mentions of both terms only started to increase in 2011 and “*gongzhi*” rose much more drastically, meaning that netizens were not active in shaping public intellectuals’ image until then and when they were, the negative perception grew disproportionately. While mentions of both terms declined in 2014, “*gongzhi*” was still used at a very high frequency, showing a lasting adverse impression. The print media, especially state media, reported on public intellectuals much earlier than online platforms and often used the formal and more neutral term “*gonggong zhishi fenzi*.” The asynchronicity of state media and popular expression again suggests that denigration of public intellectuals was at least as much an online phenomenon as a state-led campaign. The dominance of “*gongzhi*” means that focusing on the negative perception toward public intellectuals is not a result of selection bias. Since the article intends to explore popular denigration of public intellectuals, analysis below focuses only on the usage of “*gongzhi*.”

⁴ Xi Dada is the cyber nickname of President Xi Jinping.

Table 1. Cross-Platform Mentions of “Gongzhi” and “Gonggong Zhishi Fenzi.”⁵

Year	Gongzhi				Gonggong Zhishi Fenzi			
	NEWSMTH	Tianya	CNKI	<i>People’s Daily Group</i>	NEWSMTH	Tianya	CNKI	<i>People’s Daily Group</i>
2004	0	26	0	0	43	16	54	9
2005	1	38	0	0	38	21	28	8
2006	0	71	0	0	15	22	55	4
2007	0	60	0	0	24	15	60	4
2008	0	146	0	0	44	27	56	7
2009	0	294	0	0	34	52	77	12
2010	11	254	0	0	85	109	110	23
2011	600	861	2	2	252	215	128	17
2012	23084	6920	72	7	1046	406	133	11
2013	23020	12600	116	7	349	499	118	4
2014	12319	10300	94	2	290	419	93	3

Source: compiled by the author.

Where Public Intellectuals Are Disliked

On Internet forums such as NEWSMTH and Tianya.cn, discussion takes place on thematic boards. As each discussion board has its theme and user base,⁶ identifying the

⁵ The study excludes entries from the Intellectual Property board, where “gongzhi” often means “common knowledge.” The forum’s search engine does not return anything from NewExpress, a board for public affairs thus closely watched by the state. This is unlikely to affect inferences of the general trend and dynamics, though.

⁶ Like-minded netizens tend to form stable online communities (Dahlberg, 2001; Hill & Hughes, 1998; Sunstein, 2006; Wellman & Gulia, 1999).

discussion boards helps reveal the particular online communities that are at odds with “public intellectuals.” Table 2 shows the top ten discussion boards with most mentions of “gongzhi,” which together account for 69% of the total mentions across the forum. The concentration rate is very high given that there are more than 500 discussion boards. As boards vary in popularity, total mentions may not properly capture the intensity of discussion on public intellectuals. Therefore, the number of mentions of “gongzhi” per 1000 posts on the board is calculated, as shown in the last column of the table.

Table 2. Discussion Boards with Most Mentions of “Gongzhi.”

Rank	Boards	Posts #	Cumulative Percentage (%)	Intensity (mentions per 1000 posts)
1	EconForum	7966	13.49	8.76
2	MilitaryJoke	6874	25.13	34.09
3	Picture	5437	34.34	6.64
4	FamilyLife	5028	42.86	0.9
5	Fangzhouzi	4951	51.25	26.2
6	MilitaryView	3882	57.83	6.55
7	Olympic	1896	61.04	7.74
8	Autoworld	1710	63.94	0.48
9	Joke	1381	66.28	2.82
10	Focus	1369	68.60	7.47

Source: Compiled by the author.

The numbers show that non-political boards such as Olympic, Picture, and FamilyLife have actively contributed to the negative perception of public intellectuals. Though relevant topics constitute only a tiny portion of expression on these boards, they are critical in promulgating the negative image of “public intellectuals” due to the high volume of traffic they attract; and as they generally host non-political discussion, mentions of “gongzhi” on them likely indicate a truly popular grassroots momentum against the group.

Two boards, Fangzhouzi and MilitaryJoke, stand out in terms of intensity. For every 1,000 posts on the two boards respectively, “*gongzhi*” was mentioned over 26 and 34 times, much more frequently than any other boards. The term was also mentioned more actively on these two boards: if an individual user includes the term in his signature or nickname sections—both customizable sections will appear in every post he puts up—it can easily boost the mentions without real discussion. For instance, on EconForum and FamilyLife over 2600 and 2500 of the mentions appeared in users’ signatures. This was not the case for Fangzhouzi and MilitaryJoke, where mentions of the term were mostly in real discussion.

These numbers help identify the major online communities that denigrated public intellectuals. With the most intense and most active mentions of “*gongzhi*,” MilitaryJoke hosts more users that have the strongest opinion toward the group than any other boards. This is not entirely surprising given that the board, primarily for military-related fun topics, attracts nationalistic netizens who do not get along well with pro-liberal and pro-western groups such as the public intellectuals. The board of Fangzhouzi is devoted to Fang Shimin, a biologist and popular commentator known for his fight against fraud and academic dishonesty. Fang himself was named as one of the top 50 public intellectuals by *Southern People Weekly* in 2004. But he refused the title, saying that he felt “ashamed to be placed in the same category” with several other nominees (Fang, 2004). Fang’s antagonism with well-known public intellectuals such as Han Han and He Weifang has generated heated debates among netizens. Given Fang’s public image as an anti-fraud fighter, his fights with prominent public intellectuals help project them as fraud and liars.

How and Why: The Challengers Toward Public Intellectuals

Numbers are telling, yet crude and largely suggestive. Only close examination of netizens’ daily activities can help reveal the micro-dynamics through which they have contested the image and status of public intellectuals. Analysis of specific discussion

threads from NEWSMTH reveals several features that confirm netizens' power as an audience to reinterpret and reshape popular perceptions of public intellectuals.

The first feature is the prominent role of Weibo. At least 8% of the posts (556 out of 6,874) that mentioned “*gongzhi*” on MilitaryJoke explicitly cited Weibo content. Given the fluidity of online expression, it is logical that netizens would bring content together across platforms. Yet, references on Weibo appeared much more frequently than any other platforms, including Netease (142 times), Southern Media Group (including *Southern Metropolis* and *Southern Weekly*, 81 times), Sina (65 times), the *People's Daily* (60 times), and *Global Times* (31 times). This may have to do with the ties between public intellectuals and Weibo. Launched in August 2009, Sina Weibo had over 100 million registered users by March 2011, making it a major platform for online expression and activism. In May 2011, Sina Weibo introduced the VIP verification program that certifies accounts of celebrities, institutions, and individuals interested in validating themselves. The program created many “Big Vs”—verified accounts with tens of thousands or even millions of followers—and granted them tremendous influence.⁷ In particular, the platform empowered media savvy pro-liberal public intellectuals. According to the People's Daily Online Public Opinion Monitoring Center (2014), 54% of the 300 opinion leaders they identified are liberals.

The popularity of Big Vs, and the denigration of public intellectuals went hand in hand. Weibo granted public intellectuals tremendous influence while also turned them into targets that are constantly watched, discussed, and challenged by the audiences. When they make mistakes, as they often do, or go against popular beliefs, they will be spotted and criticized. Moreover, the prominence of the group has incentivized people to exploit the label for personal gains. As the public intellectual Xu Zhiyuan (2014) has

⁷ As of May 2017, He Weifang and Han Han have more than 1.8 million and 44 million followers respectively. Li Chengpeng had more than 7 million followers when his Weibo account was suspended in 2014.

acknowledged, some so-called “public intellectuals” are not intellectuals at all, but opportunists “acting senselessly” (*xia nao*). Such opportunists certainly taint the group’s reputation. Abusing the label not only devalues the brand, but also blurs the group identity: now that there is no longer a clear definition of a “public intellectual,” netizens are free to construct their own perception, even in exaggerated and biased ways. For instance, netizens have created a meme of “*gongzhi* style” (*gongzhi ti*) by associating some negative discursive traits with the group. A series of false quotations in the name of world-famous celebrities and institutions are good examples of this *gongzhi* style, and one of them is, “Madam Thatcher once said, ‘China is a country we can neglect because it produces only washing machines and refrigerators, not ideas...’” (Tencent, 2012, para. 1). Evidently, the “style” associates public intellectuals not only with anti-regime and pro-western orientations, but also with rumormongering.

The second feature is the salient role of critical events in driving the denigration of public intellectuals, which again demonstrate the presenter-audience dynamics. One of the earliest events that generated a splash on NEWSMTH was about He Bing, a law professor who was named as a top-100 public intellectual twice in 2011 and 2013 by the Politically Right and Economically Left Research Group. On December 2, 2011, when trying to enter the campus of Communication University of China (CUC) to deliver a talk, his car was stopped by a security guard for not carrying a valid pass. Feeling offended, He complained on Weibo, where he had more than 96,000 followers at the time, “The CUC security guard was so arrogant! ... Do you think you are guarding Zhongnanhai?”⁸ The incident stirred up debates among netizens. Many criticized He for being arrogant, as the guard did nothing wrong but following the rules. In effect, to ridicule He, one MilitaryJoke user immediately put this event in his signature, “The era when a public intellectual can intimidate a security guard by flashing his name card is now forever gone!”⁹ Such a depiction was clearly not what He intended to project.

⁸ Zhongnanhai is where the headquarters of the state and the party locate.

⁹ One example of the signature is available at <http://ar.newsmth.net/thread->

The image of public intellectuals as a group deteriorated with attempts to defend He. In a Tencent Weibo entry, Renmin University professor Zhang Ming (2011) grouched that “only in China university campuses are guarded by security guards” because they are “*yamen*.” By likening universities to *yamen*—the mandarin’s office and residence in feudal China and thus symbolizes bureaucratism and hierarchy, Zhang tried to justify He’s behavior as a protest against the regime rather than demanding privileges. Instead of saving He, Zhang turned himself into a target. On MilitaryJoke, a user posted Zhang’s tweet together with the following rebuttal, “Professor Zhang, better not be so assertive unless you’re very sure about something. Harvard has security guards on its main campus and they carry guns. You think Harvard is *yamen* then” (petriv, 2011)? The juxtaposition of Zhang’s words with factual rebuttal effectively sets the mood of the whole thread as users continued jeering at Zhang, depicting him as “distorting history,” “ill-informed,” “ignorant,” and “shameless” (petriv, 2011).

In early 2012, the anti-fraud crusader Fang Zhouzi accused popular writer and blogger Han Han for having his father ghost-writing for him. This dispute turned out to be a public relations fiasco for public intellectuals. Though not everyone agrees with Fang on Han as a fraud, the spectacle “cast deep skepticism on both public figures and Chinese intellectuals in general” (Jiang, 2016, p. 40). In one thread, a user defended Han, arguing that Han is not a “notorious public intellectual” because he does not fit the criteria of “1) being lenient to themselves, but harsh on others; 2) talking nonsense beyond expertise; 3) forming gangs and cliques; and 4) would never admit mistakes” (Trade, 2013). This is ironic because though Han is an iconic “public intellectual,” the negative perception of the group has forced his supporters to distance him from the label.

Though the Internet helps amplify public intellectuals’ influence, it also makes it impossible for them to decide who will hear them, how they will be heard, or to control

how their expressions will be interpreted, reproduced, and redistributed. As a result, public intellectuals failed to influence popular perceptions in both the “He Bing” case and the “Han Han” case discussed above. Figure 1 indicates how a number of events boosted the mentions of “*gongzhi*” on NEWSMTH.

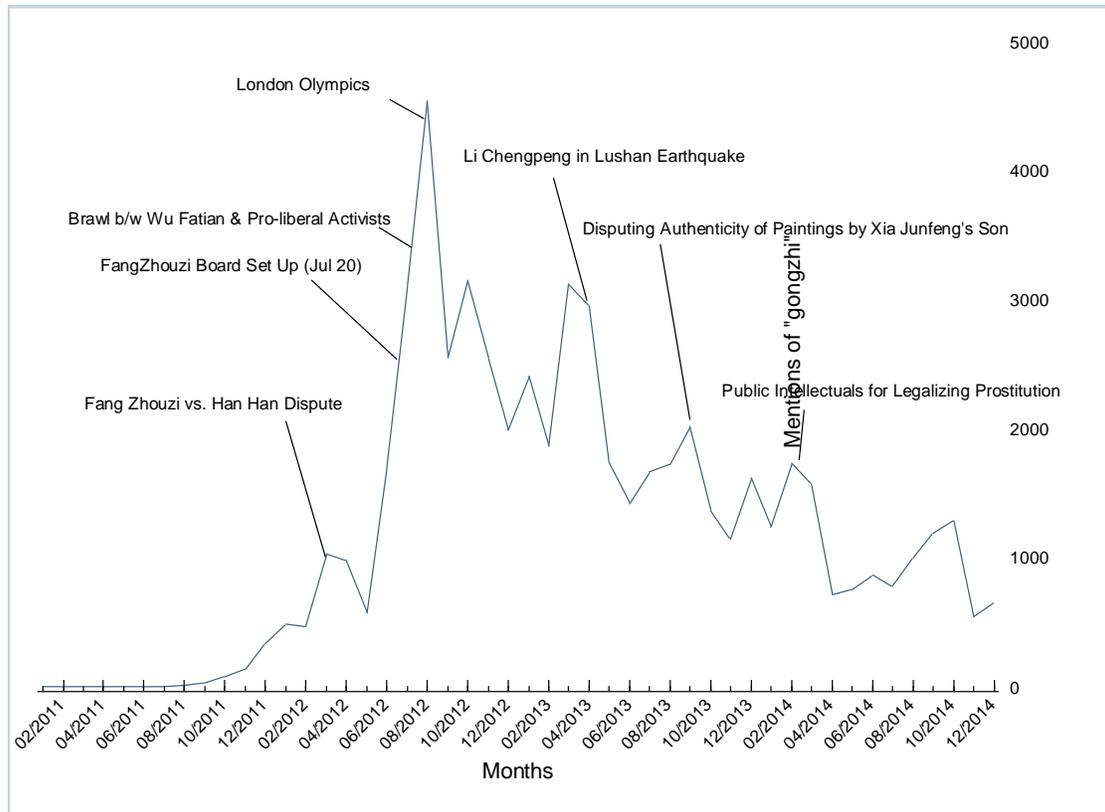


Figure 1. Selected events and discussion on public intellectuals (NEWSMTH).

The third feature is that unlike state criticism, ideological deviance is not the primary factor that causes netizens’ antipathy to public intellectuals. This by no means suggests that netizens’ denigration of public intellectuals has no normative or political underpinnings. Rather, a different set of the norms, values, and beliefs are at the heart of the contestation. Nationalism, in particular, is a critical driving force against *gongzhi*—

this is why boards attracting nationalistic netizens such as MilitaryJoke have played an active role in denigrating the group.

In a way, many public intellectuals are also nationalists, though their perspective toward national interest differs from that of many vocal netizens. To them, China's circumstances will improve through introspection, criticism, and free debate (Goldman & Esarey, 2008). And they are often wary of "popular nationalism" as a tool of the regime to shore up legitimacy. The concern is justifiable given that Chinese nationalism is often considered as state-led (Zhao, 1998). However, when public intellectuals confront popular nationalism, they *give off* extra messages from netizens' perspective. In netizens' eyes, many "public intellectuals" are overly pro-western, to the extent that they have become foreign surrogates or self-haters, especially given their institutional, financial, and ideational ties with the West. Such a frame conditions netizens' reaction to whatever public intellectuals express online. For instance, He Weifang as a respected law professor and public intellectual has constantly been criticized by nationalistic netizens. The fact that Wikileaks revealed that he had served an "informant" of the U.S. State Department only confirmed netizens' suspicions of him being as a member of the "road-leading party," a synonym to traitor (i3721pp, 2011). His image was further tainted when he criticized the Guangzhou Evergrande football team for putting the national flag on their uniforms after the team won a ticket to the FIFA Club World Cup in 2013, as an attempt to dampen the nationalist fervor. Even non-political netizens saw it as an overreaction that betrays his hostility toward patriotism as embroidering uniforms with national flag is a common practice (NBAthlon, 2013). To ridicule him, netizens juxtaposed his micro-blog entry and uniforms of other world-famous clubs that have national flags (Hupu, 2013). He Weifang is by no means the exception. The nationalistic forum April Media (m4.com, formerly anti-CNN.com) in effect has a special channel to collect and deride Weibo entries by public intellectuals who they perceive as national enemies.¹⁰

¹⁰ The channel has been renamed from "Public intellectual observation" to "Weibo Observation." See <http://bbs.m4.cn/forum-1396-1.html>.

Popular nationalism is not the only normative realm where the two sides do not see eye to eye. Netizens and public intellectuals perceive many socio-political issues in different ways, leading to conflicts that display the pluralization of norms, beliefs, and identities in Chinese cyberspace. For instance, when public intellectuals such as Xiong Peiyun (2011), Xiao Han (2011), and He Weifang (2011) advocated for the abolition of the death penalty amidst public anger toward Yao Jiaxin, who stabbed a woman to death after hitting her down in a traffic accident, they ignited the fury of many netizens.

The last feature of netizen-driven attacks on public intellectuals is embodied in the strategies they employ. Besides attacking their beliefs, values, and identities, netizens often pick on public intellectuals' factual or logical errors. In the case of He Weifang criticizing the Evergrande football team, many netizens viewed his opinion as a manifestation of ignorance as much as an unpatriotic behavior. As one NEWSMTH user commented, "The authorities shall issue a point-system 'public-intellectual' license just like the driver's license. Then those like He who frequently got face slapped should be banned for one or half a year?" (NBAthlon, 2013, para. 5).

In fact, instead of waiting for public intellectuals to make mistakes, netizens would sometimes actively "bait" them with false or fabricated information to show how gullible they are, and how ulterior motives have blinded them. For instance, a Weibo user published the following entry on April 9, 2013,

Here is the reason for the traffic jam this morning: A woman was speeding and a cop attempted to pull her over and ticket her. She refused to stop and tried to scratch the police car. The cop then shot the women dead through the window! The car is still on No. 75 Freeway! (Qi Tong-Xuanwuyan xinmeiti, 2013, micro-blog)

The incident actually happened in Texas, US. But the critical information was

intentionally left out to hook public intellectuals who would “habitually criticize” China—after all, double-checking the fact should not take too much effort. Several perceived public intellectuals such as lawyer Yuan Yulai and rock musician Zuoxiao Zuzhou indeed took the bait and criticized police brutality in China. This event immediately went viral: The entry was forwarded almost 30,000 times and received over 17,600 comments within three months. On Tianya.cn, a single thread on the topic attracted over 800 replies in four days (Shenwanyishi, 2013). On NEWSMTH, one thread on Picture attracted 66 comments (wissenschaft, 2015).

Focusing on public intellectuals’ ignorance and incompetence not only depoliticizes the attacks, but also enhances the credibility and persuasiveness of the criticism. Moreover, it effectively supports netizens’ denigration of the group on other aspects. As the above cited “Home-Made Public Intellectuals” post implies, the reason why public intellectuals behave in opportunistic, offensive, and entitled ways may well be that they have little expertise or competence—otherwise they could have resorted to facts and sound reasoning.

Conclusion

Through examining the contestation over “public intellectuals,” especially how the group was denigrated in everyday online discussion, this article argues that the process is driven as much by netizens as the state. This is not to deny the state’s efforts to suppress and defame “public intellectuals.” State-run media has constantly attempted to criticize the group. And as Goldman (2012) points out, intellectuals remain under Party control and the public space for political discourse has been contracting. In the 2013 anti-rumor campaign, the state not only directly repressed politically active online opinion leaders (Cheng, 2014), but also deployed the “fifty-cent army” to promulgate negative comments on public intellectuals. Given the popular reception of state propaganda (Esarey, Stockmann, & Zhang, 2017), such efforts may have helped denigrate public intellectuals. However, the wording of leaked official propaganda directive implies the

state was at least partially responding to (rather than initiating) popular denigration of public intellectuals. It states that, “Recently, an anti-public intellectual movement has appeared online. Please conduct public opinion guidance work accordingly” (Zhanggong District Internet Propaganda Office, 2013).

Compared to the state’s efforts, netizen-driven denigration of “public intellectuals” displays distinctive features. Unlike the struggle between the state and pro-liberal media, netizens’ criticisms do not center on the group’s ideological deviance. Instead, popular nationalism and other normative drives have motivated netizens to denigrate the group. Moreover, netizens tend to pick on factual or logical errors, thus not only effectively project an image of “public intellectuals” as ignorant and incompetent, but also differentiate themselves from state agents.

Instead of assuming a subversive Internet, this article highlights its pluralization. To a large extent, the struggle over online expression in today’s China resembles market competition more than a cat-and-mouse fight between the state and social actors. Unlike the traditional media sphere dominated by the state (and media professionals to a lesser degree), the Internet allows various actors to produce, distribute, and consume content. Such an opportunity benefits regime-challengers. But it also enhances ordinary netizens’ status as consumers who actively (re)interpret, (re)produce, and (re)distribute messages they receive based on their own understandings and judgments. In this way, netizens have become crucial players in online discourse competition.

Considering that the authoritarian regime has been struggling to dismiss the impact of public intellectuals with little success when the idea was first introduced by the pro-liberal media back in 2004, the popular denigration of the group has helped the state to achieve its goal. In particular, by embracing popular cyber culture and expressional elements, these netizens may have defended the regime more effectively than the state: their sharp and blatant attack on public intellectuals has been facilitated by their humorous and appealing expressional tactics, which the state has sought in official

propaganda and not always effectively. In this sense, these netizens have contributed to authoritarian resilience, albeit indirectly.

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