

**Rescuing Authoritarian Rule:
The Anti-*Gongzhi* Discourse in Chinese Cyberspace**

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Abstract

This chapter explores how pluralization of expression may have in some ways worked against democratic discourses in Chinese cyberspace. Using a mix-method approach combining in-depth online ethnographic work and computer-aided content analysis, it investigates how ordinary netizens have engaged the discourse competition on “*gongzhi*,” an abbreviated term popularly used to refer to “public intellectuals.” The chapter finds that freer online expression has not only empowered criticisms of the authoritarian regime, but also brings those regime challengers under scrutiny and attacks. In particular, the rise of an anti-*gongzhi* discourse—by denigrating “public intellectuals”—has worked to the party-state’s advantage, helping it to defame its critics and to undermine the pro-democracy discourses they advocate.

Keywords: *gongzhi*, public intellectuals, discourse competition, internet, China

The rapid expansion of the Internet and social media has heightened the tension between the ruling and the ruled in authoritarian regimes. In particular, by enabling freer information flow, the Internet now empowers social actors in repressive settings to better communicate, organize, and mobilize (Shirky, 2011). But authoritarian regimes such as China have remained resilient despite the digital challenges. Why? One plausible explanation is China has a high-capacity state that has effectively curtailed the Internet's emancipating effects using a series of control mechanisms as well as other adaptive measures. Another explanation can be that citizens in China are focusing on concrete and specific grievances, thus are not interested in contesting and denying the CCP's legitimacy to rule. This chapter proposes a third explanation from the perspective of discourse competition. By examining how "public intellectuals" as a group has been denigrated in Chinese cyberspace, it argues that the anticipated effect of the Internet to promote liberal and democratic values has been severely hindered by pluralization of online expression, which in turn decreases the threat towards authoritarian rule.

Using a mix-method approach that combines long-term in-depth online ethnographic work and computer-aided discourse analysis, the chapter investigates how ordinary Chinese Internet users (hereafter netizens¹) have engaged in the discourse competition on public intellectuals (*gonggong zhishi fenzi* 公共知识分子 or *gongzhi* 公知 in short). It finds that while freer online expression has indeed empowered regime challengers such as public intellectuals, it also gives rise to a diverse group of discourse contenders that represent drastically different values, beliefs, and identities. Thus, besides the conventional liberalization-control struggle between the citizenry and the state, especially the cat-and-mouse censorship game, one can also observe the competition of different discourses in Chinese cyberspace. As the chapter shows, public

intellectuals have gained considerable power in agenda setting and issue framing with the expansion of the Internet and social media. But it also means that their expressions and behavior are watched, analyzed, and attacked by netizens who disagree with them. These netizens not only directly contest the “*gongzhi*” discourse that is critical towards the authoritarian regime, but also more importantly have gradually constructed an “anti-*gongzhi*” narrative that depicts public intellectuals negatively as ill-intentioned and incompetent rather than brave individuals fighting for the good of the public. Such an anti-*gongzhi* discourse has worked to the Chinese party-state’s advantage because it undermines the pro-liberal and pro-democracy discourses in China.

The Politics of Online Expression in China

Given the high-capacity repressive authoritarian regime, many studies on cyber politics in China focus on the struggle over the limits of online expression—how Chinese citizens have pushed the boundaries of free expression and how the party-state has attempted to constrain such freedom. Scholars have explored how Chinese netizens can creatively and artfully evade state censorship to express themselves and protest against authoritarian rule (Esarey and Xiao, 2008; Yang, 2009; Xiao, 2011; Tong and Lei, 2013). Scholars have also investigated how the Chinese party-state adapts to the digital era by establishing a multi-level comprehensive censorship system that controls deviant expression and suppresses outspoken citizens (Zheng, 2008; Li, 2009; MacKinnon, 2009; Han, forthcoming 2018a), thus maintain online expression a privilege rather than a right for citizens (Creemers, 2016). Besides identifying specific control mechanisms, recent scholarship has also started to explore the rationale of state censorship (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013, 2014; Lorentzen, 2014).

But, the struggle over censorship is not the full story of online expression in China as “both the party-state and non-state actors have attempted to influence online public opinion using tactics that extend far beyond the usual censorship and counter-censorship dynamics” (Han, 2015a, p. 1006). On the one hand, Chinese cyberspace is quite fragmented considering the diverse values, beliefs, motives and identities of netizens. For some scholars, Chinese netizens are not politically driven in general (Damm, 2007; Leibold, 2011). Even political netizens are demonstrating quite different political orientations that often are in conflict with each other (Leibold, 2010; Wu, 2014). In particular, popular cyber nationalism often works to the advantage of the authoritarian regime, though netizens may occasionally contest the party-state’s claim to nationalist legitimacy (Zhou, 2005; Wu, 2007; Shen and Breslin, 2010). In fact, as Min Jiang (2016) argues, the Chinese Internet has witnessed a co-evolution of civil society, uncivil forces, as well as authoritarianism. On the other hand, Internet control has evolved beyond censorship in China as the party-state has resorted to more innovative propaganda tactics to shape online expression and manipulate public opinion online. Besides setting up official accounts on popular social media platforms to directly engage netizens, the state has also embraced popular cyber culture as the vehicle to popularize state ideological constructs (Lagerkvist, 2008) and sponsored state agents to fabricate fake grassroots pro-regime expression (Hung, 2010; Han, 2015b; Miller, 2016; King, Pan and Roberts, 2017). All these studies suggest that the struggle in Chinese cyberspace is not just about pushing the limits of expression. Rather, online expression is also about different opinions, norms, and ultimately discourses competing with each other within the state-imposed boundaries (Lagerkvist, 2010; Han, forthcoming 2018a). Compared to the control and anti-control framework, such a discourse competition perspective better depicts the pluralization of Chinese cyber politics and better explains resilient authoritarianism in the digital era.

Public Intellectuals and Democracy

Taking the discourse competition perspective, this chapter explores the representations of “public intellectuals” in Chinese cyberspace. The author chooses to study “public intellectuals” because the group not only plays a unique role in challenging authoritarian rule in China, but also lies at the center of online debates in recent years. Examining how netizens perceive the group helps illuminate important topics in Chinese cyber politics, especially the resilience of authoritarianism.

When first introduced to China by pro-liberal media, the concept of “public intellectuals” bears similarities to, though not completely overlap with, the Western understanding of the term, i.e. scholars who tune into current socio-political affairs and try to influence public debates or state policies. The *Southern People Weekly* (2004), which first nominated China’s top 50 public intellectuals in September 2004, defines group as “intellectuals with academic background and professional qualities, actors that speak out and participate in public affairs, and idealists with critical spirits and moral undertakings.” Given the authoritarian regime, public intellectuals are also perceived as, albeit often implicitly, being inherently dissenting, with the mission to fight authoritarian rule, to enlighten the public, and to spread liberal democratic values (Goldman and Esarey, 2008; Hao and Guo, 2016; Steinhardt, 2016). In fact, quite some of the fifty “public intellectuals” selected by *Southern People Weekly* such as Mao Yushi (茅于軾), He Weifang (贺卫方), and Zhang Sizhi (张思之), were well-known advocates of political reform and civil liberties. The party-state’s reaction further confirms the dissenting nature of “public intellectuals”: on November 15, 2014, the *Liberation Daily* published a commentary, which was then reprinted in the *People’s Daily*, denouncing “public intellectual” as a harmful concept that

sets intellectuals against the people and the Party (Ji, 2004). Later, another state-run newspaper, the *Guangming Daily* attacked the idea as “extremely dangerous” because of its “obvious ideological inclinations” (Guangdong Provincial Research Center of Deng Xiaoping Theory and Three Represents, 2004). In fact, besides vehement verbal attacks on the group, the regime also tried to silence daring public intellectuals by preventing them from appearing in print media (Reporters Without Borders, 2004). The state’s efforts to defame and control “public intellectuals” only betray the significant impact of the group on authoritarian rule.

The Internet, especially popular social media platforms such as the Twitter-like Sina Weibo, has amplified the influence of public intellectuals. Launched in 2009, Sina Weibo attracts over 340 million monthly active users as of the first quarter in 2017, making it the most important virtual base for online expression and mobilization (China Internet Watch, 2017). Its VIP verification program, which assigns the letter v to a verified account, has granted media savvy public intellectuals huge influence by turning them into “Big Vs”—opinion leaders with thousands or even millions of followers. For instance, as of June 2017, Han Han (韩寒), popular writer and blogger, has over 44.3 million followers; He Weifang, Peking University law professor, has about 1.9 million followers. Li Chengpeng (李承鹏), former sports reporter and social activist, had over 7.4 million followers until his Weibo account was shut down by the government in 2014. These numbers are impressive considering the state’s constant efforts to suppress online opinion leaders. Besides attacks mentioned in the previous paragraph, the state launched a massive ant-rumor campaign in 2013 that also cracked down on critical opinion leaders, including public intellectuals. Among others, Charles Xue, an American Chinese investor and outspoken Weibo celebrity with over 12 million followers, was detained and forced to apologize

on state media for his irresponsibility as an opinion leader (Xinhua News Agency, 2013). Leaked official documents show that the state also mobilized the “fifty-cent army” to explicitly defame public intellectuals under the disguise of ordinary netizens (Zhanggong District Internet Propaganda Office, 2013). Reportedly, the campaign had resulted in a 40 per cent reduction in online opinion leaders’ Weibo activities compared to the previous year (Cheng, 2014).

The rise of public intellectuals and the state’s repressive reactions demonstrate well the tensions between authoritarianism and liberal democratic norms in Chinese cyberspace. The popularity of public intellectuals despite state control seems to resonate with the observation that the state has lost the war of position (Tong and Lei, 2013). Does that mean the discourse competition is finally moving China towards inclusive liberal democracy, as some have expected (Lagerkvist, 2010)? Based on data from a popular Internet forum NewSmth, the chapter reveals that the rise of public intellectuals has been accompanied by the spread of an anti-*gongzhi* discourse that works to the party-state’s advantage by directly countering the pro-liberal and pro-democracy discourses that public intellectuals advocate, by arousing a nationalistic frame that depicts the regime positively, and by defaming public intellectuals and regime critics. Thus, though public intellectuals may have won the war of position, their image and discourse are contested among many netizens; while the state may have lost the war of position, pro-regime voices have not.

Data and Methods

This chapter employs a mixed-method approach that combines in-depth online ethnography and quantitatively informed discourse analysis. The primary source of data is the popular Internet forum NewSmth (newsnth.net), formerly the Tsinghua University campus forum, which had

more than 500 discussion boards and attracted over 40,000 simultaneous visitors during its peak hours daily as of September 2015. Focusing on NewSmth and using other more popular sources such as Weibo and Tianya only for triangulation (data from both sources confirm the findings in general) not only makes data collection more effective and manageable, but also enables better observation of genuine spontaneous expression because it is likely less closely monitored and controlled by the state. The author has been observing NewSmth closely since 2005 on almost daily basis, following discussion threads, recording online activities, and exploring links. Since online expression is a context-specific process through which meanings are created, distributed, and consumed in community settings rather than in a borderless space, long-term in-depth ethnographic work is necessary for discourse analysis, as only in this way the researcher can learn the norms of the community and the knowledge necessary to accurately interpret the texts.

The research is quantitatively informed in that it uses computer aided content analysis tactics to facilitate human interpretation of the texts. As NewSmth has over 500 active discussion boards, studying users' discussion of public intellectuals on any of them is insufficient to fully capture the representations of the group. Hence, the author has scrapped the first five lines of all posts between December 5, 2010 and October 15, 2015 that contain the keyword "*gongzhi*" using NewSmth's built in search engine. The term "*gongzhi*" is picked because it better represents how netizens regard public intellectuals than any other keywords: between 2011 and 2014, it appeared over 59,023 times on NewSmth, while the more formal term "*gonggong zhishi fenzhi*" appeared only 1,937 times. After the data cleaning process, the author created a dataset containing 21,080 unique mentions of "*gongzhi*" from 312 discussion boards for further analysis.

The fact that “*gongzhi*” appeared on over three hundred boards means that discussion on “public intellectuals” was not an idiosyncratic phenomenon, but highly penetrating and far-reaching. Meanwhile, over 80 percent of the mentions concentrated on fifteen boards. The top five boards, Picture, EconForum, MilitaryJoke, MilitaryView, and FangZhouzi, together account for over 57 percent of all mentions (Table 1). These five boards attract users with quite different interests, motives, and political orientations, again suggesting that the contestation over “public intellectuals” is widely spread among netizens.

Table 1: Top 5 Boards with Active Mentions of “*Gongzhi*”

Board Name	Counts
Picture (贴图)	4102
EconForum (经济论坛)	2600
MilitaryJoke (军苑娱乐报)	2128
MilitaryView (军事瞭望)	1694
FangZhouZi (方舟子)	1547

Figure 1 shows the distribution of “*gongzhi*” mentions in total and on top five boards across the time. The fluctuations suggest that discussion on public intellectuals was likely driven by bursts of online events. For instance, the spike in mid-2012 was a result of the dispute between the anti-fraud activist Fang Zhouzi (方舟子) and popular writer Han Han. Both Fang and Han were regarded as public intellectuals. In January 2012, Fang accused Han for ghostwriting, which started a virtual war between their supporters, subsequently boosting the mentions of “*gongzhi*.” Analysis of additional data beyond what is shown in Figure 1 also supports the argument. For example, on one of the top ten boards with most “*gongzhi*” counts, Olympic, devoted to discussion on Olympics games, recorded 962 mentions of the term during the London Olympics between July 26 and September 3, 2012. Such a high density reflects the tension between public

intellectuals who criticized China’s “*juguo tizhi*” (举国体制, the “whole nation system” to win at all costs) and netizens who were cheering for China’s achievements and Chinese athletes’ top performance in the games.

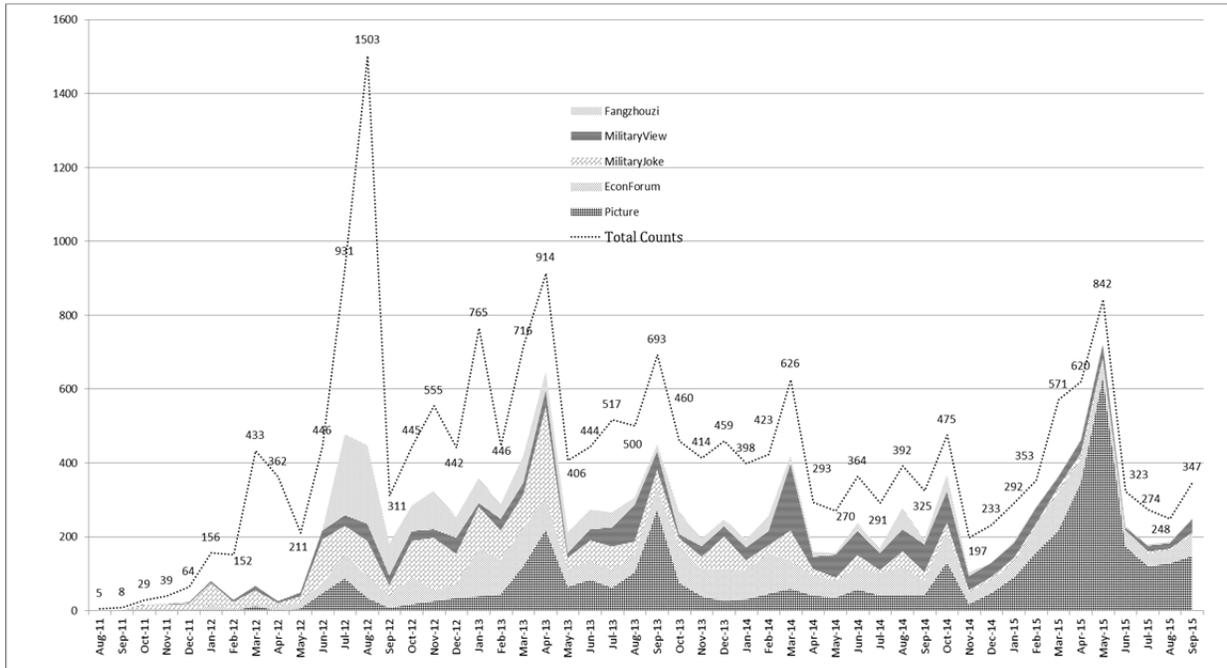


Figure 1: Distribution of “Gongzhi” Mentions (August 2011- September 2015)

The Anti-Gongzhi Discourse

The above analysis suggests that counts of “*gongzhi*” were associated with controversial events. But it is unclear whether such an association embodies enmity or amity between public intellectuals and NewSmth users. To further explore how netizens perceive public intellectuals, the author used R to sort out terms that appeared most frequently with “*gongzhi*” in discussion threads collected from over three hundred boards of NewSmth. Table 2 presents the top 60 terms, excluding “*gongzhi*” and stop words that do not contain significance. The frequency count approach is used instead of sentiment analysis because public intellectuals are often active in

controversial topics, thus detected sentiments may reflect users' view of substantive topics, not that of public intellectuals.

Table 2: The Top 60 Terms Related to “Gongzhi” (excluding stop words)

Terms	Mentions	Terms	Mentions
中国 (China)	1731	天天(everyday)	192
五毛 (the fifty-cent army)	1094	政治(politics)	188
美国 (the U.S.)	895	攻击(attacks)	186
政府 (Government)	769	美帝(the U.S. imperialists)	185
民主(Democracy)	452	警察(police)	181
国家 (Nation/State)	434	公知范(<i>gongzhi</i> style)	179
美分(the U.S.-cent army)	434	呵呵(hehe)	178
国内(Domestic)	390	利益(interests)	176
韩寒(Han Han)	387	地方(localities)	174
方舟子(Fang Zhouzi)	371	估计(estimate)	174
体制(Regime)	371	公知粉(<i>gongzhi</i> fans)	173
社会(Society)	347	带路(road-leading)	172
喜欢(Like)	314	日本(Japan)	172
造谣(Rumormongering)	313	西方(west/western)	171
忽悠(fooyou/con)	304	言论(expression)	170
天朝(Heavenly Dynasty/China)	298	观点(opinions)	169
媒体(media)	293	微博上(on Weibo)	167
微博(Weibo)	279	老百姓(the masses)	166
事情(events/things)	276	群众(the masses)	163
支持(support)	263	网络(the Internet)	160
智商(IQ/Intelligence)	251	洗脑(brainwashing)	159
人民(the people)	250	历史(history)	157
水平(competence level)	244	脑残(idiotic)	157
自干五(the “voluntary fifty-cent”)	241	说话(speak)	157
反对(against)	238	关系(relations)	155
逻辑(logic)	227	世界(world)	152
代表(represent/representative)	227	南方(Southern [media group])	151
恶心(disgusting)	225	记者(journalists)	150
东西(a thing)	225	感觉(feel/feeling)	150
精英(elite)	192	希望(hope)	149

A quick scan of the terms suggest that “*gongzhi*” is often associated with topics related to China, government, democracy, politics, state, regime, society, the people, the masses, U.S., Japan, and West. Such terms apparently confirm the public or political nature of “public intellectuals,” either because public intellectuals themselves often invoke such terms or because netizens relate

them to such terms. In particular, closer reading of the texts shows that NewSmth users believe that *gongzhi* often criticize China, the government, the state, while praising the U.S., Japan, and the West. Examples of such expression would be (English translation provided by one of the authors and the source board listed in the brackets):

- (1) 公知们不放过任何可以打中国政府脸的“借口”呗，就是有时候顺道也把美国爸爸的脸也打了。 [*Gongzhi* never give up any chances to slap the Chinese government's face, though they occasionally may hit the face of their father U.S. by accident.] (Aero)
- (2) 大部分公知跟你说的不一样，他们总说看看中国人多不好，外国人不这样。 [Most *gongzhi* are unlike what you've described. They would always say: look at how bad the Chinese are and foreigners never behave like this.] (Joke)

Though netizens often do not directly juxtapose how *gongzhi* view China and the “West” as the above two quotes do, it is quite clear that the discourse on NewSmth generally depicts public intellectuals as being hypocritical toward China while holding overly laudatory opinions of foreign countries, especially Western democracies.

Many Newsmth users do not see *gongzhi* as representing the public, either, which is quite different from the depiction of the group by pro-liberal media. For instance, users either explicitly argue that *gongzhi* are the opposite of the people or linked the group to democratic activists, claiming that both groups want to mess up China, so certainly do not belong to the people. The term “*gongzhi*” also often appears together with “the people” in entries such as “The people want golden and silver medals, not *gongzhi*” (人民需要金牌银牌,不需要公知).

However, *gongzhi* often are linked to the masses when the latter are described as ignorant and ill-informed (*buming zhenxiang* 不明真相). It is often argued that *gongzhi* are intentionally using rumors to influence or even appeal to ignorant and ill-formed masses because the latter can be

most easily fooled by the former. This suggests that the linkage between *gongzhi* and the public reflects more recognition of the former's influence over the latter, rather than the close ties between the two. In fact, some netizens even argued that *gongzhi* were intentionally manipulating the masses to their advantage. For instance, amidst the Fang Zhouzi vs. Han Han dispute in which Fang accused Han for having his father ghostwriting the popular novels under his name, one user made the following comment: “[Han’s] anti-regime pretense earn him the reputation and *gongzhi* fans in the political circle; playing cool allows [him] to make profits and attract ignorant followers in the entertainment circle” (反体制，可以捞名赚政治圈的公知粉；装逼耍酷，可以获利赚娱乐圈的脑残粉). In the eyes of this user, whatever Han did was about establishing and expanding his fan base for personal influence and benefits.

In fact, Fang Zhouzi and Han Han also ranked quite high on the list of the most frequently mentioned terms, confirming the impact of the Fang-Han dispute on how netizens perceive the group. Discussion on the event took place on two major discussion boards, FangZhouzi and Focus, both are top ten boards in terms of mentions of “*gongzhi*.” Though not all users bought the argument that Han’s popular novels were ghostwritten, the dispute apparently contributed to the defamation of *gongzhi*, especially among supporters of Fang. Such attacks on individual public intellectuals such as Han Han, Li Chengpeng, He Weifang served as an important venue for NewSmth users to defame the group.

A number of terms are likely referring to the ideological or identity camps that netizens relate public intellectuals to in different ways. Such terms include the fifty-cent army (state sponsored Internet commentators), the U.S.-cent army (supposedly counterparts of the fifty-cent army that

are sponsored by the U.S. government), the road-leading [party] (those China betrayers who lead the way for foreign invaders), the voluntary fifty-cent (those who are not sponsored by the state, but defends the regime like the fifty-cent army), the elite, Southern media group, and journalists. First, *gongzhi* are often depicted as surrogates of foreign countries, especially hostile forces, thus are members of the U.S.-cent army, or the road-leading party. As a result, they are the opposite of the “fifty-cent army.” For instance, in the brawl between a journalist and pro-regime law professor and active Weibo opinion leader Wu Fatian that happened in July 2012, users on NewSmth discussed Wu’s identity, arguing that because of his standpoint, Wu should be regarded as a fifty-cent army member, not *gongzhi*. Clearly, being pro-regime or not is a matter that differs *gongzhi* from the “fifty-cent army,” though Wu is unlikely a real Internet commentator. Despite such difference in the standpoint, some netizens think *gongzhi* and the fifty-cent army are essentially the same. As a MilitaryView user puts, “Both *gongzhi* and the fifty-cent army are just running dogs. They fight for anyone who gives them money” (公知五毛不都是狗么，谁有钱给谁干).

Besides the fifty-cent army, the voluntary fifty-cent army is a force that was often depicted by NewSmth users as a major opposing force against *gongzhi*. Demonstrating a general nationalistic tendency, the “voluntary fifty-cent army” is a group of netizens that claim to emphasize factual evidence and logic over one’s ideological inclinations and standpoint in online debates. They have employed a wide array of creative expressional tactics to criticize and mock regime critics (including public intellectuals), foreign countries, and sometimes the party-state, especially its propaganda apparatus that they believe to be incompetent or have been infiltrated by Western interests and ideologies. The following quote serves as a good example here:

南方系等带路党公知和新华社等真五毛合流，还有一帮猪一般的队友加盟，充分教育了人民群众，自干五的队伍空前壮大啊。 [The confluence of the road-leading party *gongzhi* from places such as the Southern clique and the real fifty-cent army such as Xinhua News Agency as well as their other incompetent allies has thoroughly educated the masses. The voluntary fifty-cent army has grown unprecedentedly.] (MilitaryView)

Public intellectuals or *gongzhi* were considered closely related to the Southern media group and journalists. This is not surprising: it was pro-liberal media outlets such as the *Southern People Weekly* that first promoted the notion of public intellectuals to the public; many of the public intellectuals are in fact pro-liberal media professionals; and pro-liberal media outlets are believed to have constantly promoted individual public intellectuals, championed their opinions, and defended them against criticisms. Other professions that *gongzhi* were often related to, but not reflected in Table 2 include lawyers, university professors, and celebrities in art or entertainment industries.

Terms such as rumormongering, con, disgusting, brainwashing, and brain-damaged carry clear negative connotations. These terms are mostly deemed to be features of *gongzhi* or their behavior among NewSmth users. For instance, a user from the Picture board argues that while it is fine to be critical, people are sick of public intellectuals because they are abusing their freedoms and rights by fabricating rumors to bash the government. Besides these negative terms, even seemingly neutral terms such as IQ/intelligence, competence, and logic in Table 2 may in fact be negative because they were often used in contexts that question the presence of such qualities.

The Anti-Gongzhi Discourse and Authoritarian Resilience

Not all NewSmth users, and certainly not all Chinese netizens, are against public intellectuals. Quite to the contrary, the group has many active and loyal supporters. But analysis of discussion

on NewSmth shows a generally negative depiction of the group and its individual members. Coding of randomly selected mentions of “*gongzhi*” on the forum confirms this finding, showing that the term is used in negative senses over 75 percent of the time (Han, forthcoming 2018b). In other words, the anti-*gongzhi* discourse was prevailing, resulting in a tainted popular image of public intellectuals.

The anti-*gongzhi* discourse generally sees Chinese public intellectuals as being ideologically pro-liberal, pro-western, anti-regime, and even anti-China. While such political orientations may not be an issue for many netizens, they have resulted in popular disdain of public intellectuals among nationalist netizens, who often question public intellectuals’ loyalty to the nation due to their ideational, institutional, and financial ties to the West. That explains why *gongzhi* is often accused of being foreign agents or will be “leading the road” for foreign invaders. Even to less nationalistic netizens, some *gongzhi* appear to be overly pro-western and hyper-critical towards the Chinese government, state, and the people; such a strong pre-disposition has not only prevented them from properly evaluating the role of the current regime and the CCP in unifying, industrializing, and reviving China, but also limited their scope of view as they hardly appreciate non-Western/Chinese values and development models.

The anti-*gongzhi* narrative depicts public intellectuals as opportunists who are inherently self-interested. Though they claim to represent the public, they often just leverage the public to pursue their own agenda or benefits. As one user from the Railway board put it, “Many media and *gongzhi* ‘talk about’ conscience, few of them actually have it” (“讲”良心的媒体和公知多，有良心的媒体和公知少). In this user’s eyes, talking about conscience is simply an instrument for public intellectuals, whose actions are driven by ulterior motives. Comments like

this echo earlier analysis on how netizens have likened *gongzhi* to the fifty-cent army and associated them with rumormongering, being fraud, and brainwashing the masses.

Netizens also raise questions about the competence of public intellectuals in the anti-*gongzhi* discourse. This is quite ironic given that public intellectuals by definition, at least in the Western understanding, should first be intellectuals with sufficient education, knowledge, and expertise. But analysis of online discussion threads shows that NewSmth users have often depicted public intellectuals as of questionable low levels of intelligence, competence, and logic reasoning. Some netizens even described *gongzhi* using terms such as “dumbass” (*naocan* 脑残, brain-damaged in their own words) or “fucking idiots” (*sha x* 傻X). For instance, a user comments on the Age board, “Reports by the Southern Media Group are increasingly unreadable. Represented by those so-called fucking idiots *gongzhi*, [the media group] is full of idiocy, ignorance, as well as traitorous and pro-western sentiments” (南方系的东西, 越来越不能看了。以所谓的sx公知为代表, 充斥着脑残, 无知, 卖国和西奴情调). While such accusations are often emotional and quite extreme, they are not totally unfounded in that “public intellectuals” had sometimes made factual mistakes or opinionated views detached from China’s social realities. For instance, He Weifang, law professor of Peking University and renowned public intellectual, was not only challenged by nationalistic netizens for serving as an “informant” of the U.S. State Department (as revealed by Wikileaks), but also charged on the Football board for being ignorant when he criticized the Guangzhou Evergrande football team for putting the national flag on their uniforms, as netizens found embroidering uniforms with national flag quite common across the globe.

Such an anti-*gongzhi* discourse apparently works to the advantage of the party-state. First, it directly defames public intellectuals and regime critics, casting doubt upon their motives and competence, especially among nationalist netizens. A MilitaryJoke user argues that, “Chinese *gongzhi* think that they can forgo intelligence and principles as far as they hail some slogans about democracy and freedoms. But it seems that the people who are increasingly awake and alerted will not satisfy for that” (中国的公知们以为只要喊几句民主自由的口号就可以不要智商不要原则，看越来越觉醒的人民群众是不答应的). Clearly, such users believe that public intellectuals were losing their influence among the public as Chinese citizens were becoming smarter, thus would no longer follow public intellectuals blindly. Other users argued that public intellectuals not only lost their appeals, but also contributed to the rise of pro-regime forces. In fact, more than one user claimed that they had become regime supporters because they dislike what *gongzhi* stood for. As one MilitaryJoke user put it, “most voluntary fifty-cent army members are not diehard loyal supporters of the rabbit [a cyber slang that refers to the CCP]. They become voluntary fifty-cent army purely because they are sick of *gongzhi*” (其实大部分自干五都不是兔子的死忠，纯粹是被公知恶心成自干五的).

Second, the anti-*gongzhi* discourse counters the pro-liberal and pro-democracy discourses that regime critics, including public intellectuals, advocate. In particular, many Newsmth users who are critical toward *gongzhi* perceive the group as the agents of hostile foreign forces (such as the U.S.), or forerunners of the capital, or the accomplices of the ruling elites. Thus, the political and economic reforms they urge are not in the best interest of Chinese people, but will instead led to disastrous consequences. In such discussions, many users have mentioned cases such as the Arab Spring countries, Ukraine, and India as bad examples of democratic systems or cases of failed

regime transition. By equating regime transition to chaotic socio-political disorder, the discourse denigrates *gongzhi* who push for such a transition in China.

In fact, sometimes netizens believe that *gongzhi* are not truly standing for liberal democratic values. Multiple NewSmth users mentioned satirically, in slightly different ways of wording, about “killing one’s entire family after democratization” (民主之后杀全家) as a threat from *gongzhi* to those who disagreed with them in online debates. Allegedly, a pro-liberal and pro-*gongzhi* user coined this phrase in an antagonistic exchange of conversation on China’s most popular Internet forum Tianya.cn with another user, claiming that the first thing he would do after democratization would be killing the latter’s entire family.

Third, the anti-*gongzhi* discourse also arouses a nationalistic frame in online discussion that depicts the party-state positively. As many of the previous quotes demonstrate, “*gongzhi*” often appear together with terms such as the “U.S.-Cent army” or the “road-leading party,” meaning that public intellectuals fall into the same category of traitors. In fact, some users argued that *gongzhi* actually boosted their support of the party-state, albeit sometimes in an indirect and limited fashion. Here is how one user reasoned,

实在对什么美分和公知没什么好感，天天无脑吹捧美帝和什么谷歌，这些人何德何能指点中国江山，这些自由派搞乱了苏联，搞乱了台湾，泰国，印度也乱成一团，64差点搞乱中国，这些人就该驱逐出境，说实话，中国大部分高层领导都是经过很多努力才选出的精英，人家看问题深度和长远比某些只知道谩骂的美分不知高到哪儿去了。 [I really have no good impression on those U.S.-cent army and *gongzhi*. They blindly extol the American imperialists and that Google every day. What good they have done to point fingers at China? These liberals have ruined the Soviet Union, messed up Taiwan and Thailand; India is also a mess. They almost messed up China in the June 4th incident. They should be deported. Honestly, top leaders in China are mostly elites that survived tough selection processes. God knows how much more thoughtful and visionary they are than those U.S.-cent army members who only know how to curse.] (ITExpress)

The quote suggests that nationalism and the anti-*gongzhi* discourse has blended together, helping justify authoritarian rule in China.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that expansion of the Internet and social media has enabled freer expression in China despite state control and manipulation efforts. Such limited freedom has allowed ordinary citizens to better communicate, connect, and mobilize more effectively than ever before, but has also empowered regime critics to push the boundaries of authoritarian rule and to promulgate civic discourses. At least, non-state expression now can compete with state propaganda. In this sense, cyberspace has become a new frontline of where the party-state and the society struggle over socio-political norms, identities, and discourses (Lagerkvist, 2010; Tong and Lei, 2013).

However, as this chapter shows, the struggle is not just a story of state-society confrontation. The rise of an anti-*gongzhi* discourse on NewSmth demonstrates the fragmentation within the society. Though public intellectuals, a seemingly progressive force, may have gained upper hand in the war of position vis-à-vis the state, they have had a tough time trying to win the minds and hearts of all netizens. In fact, they have been challenged and defamed by many netizens who question their ideological inclinations, loyalty to the nation, and their competence. Moreover, denigration of public intellectuals has often been associated with tacit approval or even active defense of the authoritarian regime against pro-liberal and democratic values. In other words, while state propaganda has become less effective in Chinese cyberspace, pro-regime voices still exist—and in the case of anti-*gongzhi* discourse, such voices have thrived.

It is unclear to what extent the anti-*gongzhi* discourse is spontaneous or state-led, especially given the state's capacity to manipulate online expression. The state has made efforts including deployment of the fifty-cent army, to attack, discredit, and suppress public intellectuals. But circumstantial evidence suggests that denigration of public intellectuals was at least partially popularly driven. On the one hand, anti-*gongzhi* expression was observed on over 300 discussion boards, most of which are non-political ones. It is unlikely that the fifty-cent army has penetrated so deeply on NewSmth. On the other hand, a series of online events have contributed significantly to the negative image of public intellectuals. As the state could hardly anticipate outbursts of such events, it is unlikely that the state had taken initiative in these cases, though it might "ride the tide" and utilized popular criticism of the group to its advantage.

The anti-*gongzhi* discourse was not confined to NewSmth. It has also been observed on more popular social media sites such as Sina Weibo and China's most popular Internet forum Tianya (especially its Outlook board)—both platforms attract millions of visitors on a daily basis. In other words, anti-*gongzhi* has become quite a prominent discourse online. The popularity and its potential spontaneity suggest that one may have to reassess the impact of online expression on authoritarian rule in China as well as the sources of authoritarian resilience.

¹ The term "netizen" seems to conflate citizenship with Internet usage (Herold, 2014) as not all Internet usage is political, let alone civic, in China. The concern is valid. But non-political usage can be politically relevant and being civic is not the precondition of citizenship. The term is widely used by Chinese Internet users precisely because it carries a sense of entitlement not found in reality.

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