Slogans and Slurs, Misogyny and Nationalism:
A Case Study of Anti-Japanese Sentiment by Chinese Netizens
in Contentious Social Media Comments

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In September 2012, the Japanese celebrity and porn star Sora Aoi posted two messages on her Sina Weibo account expressing friendship between Japanese and Chinese citizens. The messages elicited more than 200,000 comments, ranging from virulently anti-Japanese to supportive. These comments are a unique corpus that captures how netizens engage in what Chinese scholars term *online verbal violence*. Using mixed methods to examine this corpus, this article identifies misogynistic and nationalist slurs and examines how these slurs are used, particularly when they interact with each other. These words not only express strong emotion or engage fellow commenters, but they also reference historical events and emphatically convey one's national identity.

Keywords: *China, Japan, social media, slurs, misogyny*

In the fall of 2012, China and Japan engaged in a clash of diplomatic brinksmanship over a group of disputed islands—known as the Diaoyu Islands in China and the Senkaku Islands in Japan—in the East China Sea. As Japan threatened to buy the contested islands, which China claimed was rightfully its, online forums and social media went into nationalist overdrive. Tens of thousands of Chinese citizens heeded the call to arms and took to the streets to protest the perceived affront to national sovereignty, in some cases rioting against Japanese businesses and property.

During these demonstrations, the Japanese celebrity and porn star Sora Aoi (one of the most popular accounts on Weibo, with more than 13 million followers at the time) took to her Sina Weibo account—a microblogging site where Chinese users upload 140-character messages in a similar fashion to Twitter—and posted two Chinese-language messages just after midnight on September 14, 2012 (Figure

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1). She wrote in her first post, "I hope we can have good relations with each other. I am just like you all. I'm deeply hurt." She then attached a photo of her writing in Chinese calligraphy, "Japan-China: friendship" (Aoi, 2012b). Fewer than 20 minutes later, she wrote again, "Our country's populaces are good friends," and attached another photo of her calligraphy that read, "Chinese and Japanese citizens: friendship" (Aoi, 2012a). Tens of thousands of comments were made responding to the two posts, with more than 136,000 coming in the first 24 hours. Although the comments section to Weibo posts can sometimes be treated as conversations between participants, the speed with which comments flowed in made meaningful discussion particularly difficult. Even so, almost a third of the comments contained a direct reply to another Weibo user's comment, and many others included mentions of other Weibo users. Aoi herself did not engage in the comments section.

Figure 1. Sora Aoi's two original Weibo posts.

At the end of January 2013, at which point responses had slowed to a trickle (144 were made in December and 87 in all of January), we downloaded and parsed all 200,000-plus comments to her two posts, building a unique corpus that captures how netizens engage in what Chinese scholars term *wangluo yuyan baoli*, that is, "online verbal violence" (Dai, 2009; Li, 2008). Having performed content analysis of the corpus, we have identified certain misogynist and nationalist slurs and built sets of keywords to hone in on how the two sets of slurs are used—particularly, how certain commenters deploy misogynist slurs to promote Chinese nationalist sentiment. By engaging scholarship regarding online media, including research into typologies of comments (Mackay & Tong, 2011; Mishne & Glance, 2006) and Vincent Miller's (2008) argument that social media promotes "phatic communication," we discuss how the contentious conversation in question unfolds and examine examples where sets of slurs interact with each other. In this particular incident, slurs not only express strong emotion or engage fellow commenters, but they also reference historical events and emphatically convey one's national identity.

We will first briefly provide background on the modern-day dispute between the two countries in the East China Sea. We will then trace the general outline of Sora Aoi's posts and the comments that followed. Next, we will discuss the types of responses and the slurs used, performing close readings of several comments that we have translated to show how users employ slurs to succinctly express emotion, reference history, and convey national identity all at once.

Finally, we perform some general calculations on the data set. One finding from our analysis is that verified users—that is, those who have confirmed their identities with Weibo, who made up 2.4% of the users in this set—were associated with a nearly 25% decline in the use of slurs in the Aoi comments. In particular, they were associated with a nearly 60% decline in expressing some of the most hateful sentiments—for example, the keywords related to rape. Linking a user's voluntary decision to verify one's account and one's usage of slurs presents major endogeneity issues, and regressions with variables to control for gender, number of followers, and friends all reduced the magnitude and confidence of the conclusion. Even so, this data may still hold interest to those interested in what sort of chilling effect (or in this case, moderating effect) real-name registration—in addition to several other variables—may have on contentious conversations.

A Semipublic Discussion Space:
Censorship and Anti-Japanese Sentiment in the Comments Section

Before we begin, we should start with a caveat: As with the discussion of any sensitive topic on Weibo, the elephant in the room—or as Perry Link (2001) puts it, "the anaconda in the chandelier"—is censorship. Sina may have deleted certain comments to Sora Aoi's posts, and if it did, based on this data set, which was downloaded four months after her initial post, we would have no way of knowing. Because the comments were not downloaded in real time as the conversation took place, the corpus of comments being studied here is what remains after whatever potential censorship may have taken place.

The reason these comments are sensitive is because of the anti-Japanese nature of the conversation. Though technically on peaceful terms today, Japan and China share a fraught past, with the Japanese invasions during the First Sino-Japanese War and World War II still not forgiven by many

Chinese citizens and officials, leading to flashpoints like former Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi's annual visits to the Yasukuni Shrine and controversy in 2005 over Japan's adoption of textbooks that reportedly glossed over the country's World War II atrocities. Though Chinese officials have long exploited antiforeign sentiment for political gain (Weiss, 2014), these recent flashpoints were among the first to fully leverage the power of the Internet mob in ways that are still seen today. Even in 2005, journalist Paul Mooney presciently foretold,

> Anti-Japanese sentiment among younger people here is unprecedented—and increasing significantly. Ironically, China's opening up and the Internet are playing a key role in this trend… What began as hyperventilating in cyberspace has now spread to the streets. It's still not clear whether the government condoned the increasing online anti-Japanese sentiment out of fear of domestic criticism or to pressure Japan. But as the recent dilemma with Japan shows, riding the internet can be like riding a tiger: Once you get on, it can be very hard to get off. (para. 19)

In September 2010, a Chinese fishing trawler collided with a Japanese Coast Guard boat in disputed waters. An international incident touched off when Japan initially detained the trawler's crew but later released it after facing intense Chinese diplomatic pressure and mass protest by Chinese citizens. A similar sequence of events then took place in August and September of 2012. After the Japanese government was pressured into purchasing the disputed Diaoyu Islands from the private citizens who owned them, Chinese citizens retaliated by rioting across the country, targeting and vandalizing Japanese businesses and cars. Certainly, any topic capable of causing rioting on the streets is of concern to the Chinese government.

However, one might also legitimately question whether anti-Japanese sentiment would be a topic automatically restricted by China's censors, particularly in light of the seeming official support of past protests against Japan, most notably in 2005 when Chinese officials strenuously objected to Japan's bid for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. Not only were complaints lodged through diplomatic channels, but Xinhua, the official government news agency, also hosted a popular Internet petition that garnered more than 41 million signatures against Japan (Yang, 2009). Street protests took place in front of the Japanese embassy and spread across southern China. The *Christian Science Monitor* reported that "Beijing [was] widely thought to have tacitly supported the protests" (Marquand, 2005, para. 8), and the BBC repeated this perception: "The outbreak of protests was almost certainly sanctioned by the Chinese authorities, as they were well policed" ("Anti-Japan Protests," 2012, para. 17). If so, this would certainly not be the first time in recent history that Chinese authorities had exploited nationalist fervor and the memory of past victimization[2] for geopolitical gain both domestically and abroad.

In May 1999, after U.S. planes mistakenly bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during operations against Yugoslav forces during the Kosovo War, China's state newspaper the *People's Daily* similarly took to the Internet to organize netizens to stand up for China. The online forum the newspaper's website created, "Strengthening the Nation," served as a gathering ground for Chinese patriots to make

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[2] Captured in the slogan "Don't forget the national humiliation" (*wu wang guo chi*).

their voices heard. Unsurprisingly, the forum was not simply about promoting a stronger China but also about attacking foreign powers, what David Shambaugh terms "defensive nationalism." Citing Shambaugh, Suisheng Zhao (2000) writes:

> Defensive nationalism does not exclude a threat of prejudice and hostility toward other nations. The memory of "national humiliation" is a strong element of Chinese rhetoric. China's vulnerability engenders an urge to take a turn at being a great power. (p. 31)

Unfortunately for the government, in a sign of how uncontrollable nationalist netizens would be in the coming years,[3] the forum not only was used to lodge objections against the United States as planned (many took to surmising that the attack was all part of a Western conspiracy to secretly undermine China) but also became a virtual space for arguing in favor of an even stronger government reaction (Yang, 2009). In this new medium, citizens took to publicly "providing input for government decision making" (Yang, 2003, p. 462) on a scale that was unprecedented, even offering critiques of the government's performance. As Yang (2009) notes, one commentator on the forum disparagingly wrote that "the purpose of having an online forum is not to have another place to sing eulogies for the government—the official newspapers serve that purpose only too well!" (p. 170).

Thus it is unsurprising to learn in this case of anti-Japanese protesting over the Diaoyu Islands that Weibo was closely monitored and censored, although the online discourse on Weibo shows that popular nationalism is mainly a spontaneous, bottom-up discursive formation without much government manipulation (Feng & Yuan, 2015). As in the 1999 UN bombing incident, Cairns and Carlson (2016) confirmed that the anti-Japanese protests on Weibo in 2012 were doubly sensitive in that they served as opportunities for backlash against the Chinese government: "Surprisingly, the referent of many microbloggers' harshest nationalist invective was directed not outward toward Japan, but inward at a Chinese state they characterized as ineffectual and corrupt" (p. 24). *China Digital Times* collected a series of violent images of rioters looting and overturning Japanese cars that were promptly removed from Weibo (Henochowicz, 2012). A research study on deleted posts on Weibo found that for several days after a wave of smaller-scale protests in August 2012, the term most commonly found to trigger censorship was "anti-Japanese" (Zhu, Phipps, Pridgen, Crandall, & Wallach, 2013). When organized protests took place in more than 80 major cities across China, with some demonstrations turning violent, Weibo posts that both supported and castigated the rioters were similarly deleted (Gao, 2012; Sandra, 2012).

However, on examining the comments section for Sora Aoi's posts, one finds tens of thousands of virulently anti-Japanese and misogynist comments filled with obscenities—some of which, such as 屄 (cunt), are blocked from searching on Weibo—violent threats, and inflammatory language from both those attacking Aoi and those supporting her. Though it has been reported that Weibo posts were strictly controlled and censored, it appears that comments to posts—which users can choose to simultaneously

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[3] Suisheng Zhao (2000) notes: "Nationalism is a double-edged sword. Its destructive effects may set a limit on the utility of nationalism to Chinese leaders. It is not hard for pragmatic leaders to realize that the Boxer Rebellion-style xenophobia that prevailed during the Cultural Revolution may cause more harm than good to the communist regime" (p. 23).

publicly post to their microblogs, though most do not—were much less strictly censored. Of course, there is no way to know after the fact how heavily censored the comments section was, but it does seem notable that comments to posts—unlike microblog posts themselves—are not searchable from Weibo's search tool, and thus are much less likely to go viral. Comments typically exist solely within their own space in the comments section, and it's possible they may not have been tracked as carefully by Weibo or central authorities because, theoretically, their potential to reach the general user base is limited— analogous to how WeChat's chat functionality is apparently less censored than its own blogging platform (Ng, 2015). Decisions on censoring content based on its ability to spur collective action is a topic discussed in depth in King, Pan, and Roberts's (2013) censorship study, and their assertions are worth considering in light of the deletion of images of riots from Weibo as documented by *China Digital Times* but not of comments that verbally abuse Japanese citizens in a nonspecific manner as found in the comments in our study.

This narrowing of the audience is a feature, not a bug, of comments discussion: A comments section is a potentially more intimate discussion space for the audience to talk back to the blogger and fellow commenters regarding a specific topic. It is in this space that users both seek engagement and offer their opinions, but the audience for a comment is radically different from that of a blog post. Thus, although the comments themselves are technically public and accessible to all, in many ways the comments section is not meant to be viewed by general readers, particularly because the very nature of the comments system is so fragmented that keeping track of who said what to whom is extremely difficult, not only for outsiders but even for the commenting community itself,[4] whose members not only have to be current with all the specific vocabulary of the group and the inside jokes and memes but also must recognize callbacks and quotes to earlier comments and posts. Indeed, though Weibo's semithreaded comments system[5] is certainly more structured than Twitter's historically irregular presentation of replies to posts, untangling the responses for even a short conversation can be difficult— let alone one with more than 200,000 comments spread across two posts.

Sora Aoi and the Two Initial Posts

As mentioned, a first wave of protests, initially peaceful, roiled China in August 2012. However, it was widely acknowledged that larger-scale protests would coalesce around the anniversary of the Mukden incident on September 18 (Bradsher, 2012), a commemoration of the date in 1931 when Japan invaded the northern region of China known as Manchuria under false pretenses, precipitating the Second Sino-Japanese War. The annual marking that takes place across the country is supposedly a memorial, but more often than not it has morphed in recent years to become a catch-all opportunity to publicly vent anti-Japanese emotions.

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[4] "There is the notorious fragmentation of these conversations, which make it very hard to reconstruct them, not only for researchers, but also for the bloggers themselves" (de Moor & Efimova, 2004, p. 205).

[5] All the comments to a post are conveniently collected in a page linked to the original post, ordered by when the commenter posted them. However, though Weibo does note who is replying to specific commenters by appending the phrase "Replying to@" (回复@), it does not specify which particular comment it is in response to, as a true threaded comments system would do.

It was within this turmoil that Sora Aoi, a Japanese AV idol (AV is an English abbreviation for "adult video," popularly used by Japanese pornography consumers and marketers) posted her opinion. Aoi has an extremely wide following across Asia for her lead roles in pornographic films, but in recent years she has sought to expand her career, appearing in mainstream films and television shows. She is also among the most successful Japanese celebrities at engaging her fans around the world—an Asahi survey in China found her to be the fourth most recognized Japanese person in China, even ahead of the Japanese prime minister (Matsubara, 2012). Her official blog is translated into both traditional and simplified Chinese (Liu, 2010); she posts in Japanese, Chinese, and English to her hundreds of thousands of followers on Twitter (she earned the goodwill of Chinese netizens after taking to Twitter in April 2010 to raise money for earthquake victims in Qinghai Province); and since November 2010, she has been among the most followed celebrities on Sina Weibo, with more than 16 million fans as of January 2016.

It was to these fans that she posted at 12:01 a.m. on September 14, as reports of the start of the second wave of major protests across China began to trickle in, a photograph of calligraphy that she had written that said "Japan-China: friendship" along with the following message: "I hope that between our people we can have good relations . . . I am also like you all. Broken-hearted." Within nine seconds, the first comment was made to the post: a single period. Then, 25 seconds after her first post, the first comment about the order of her words in the calligraphy appeared: "It should be 'China-Japan friendship!'" This was one of a number of comments which suggested that the immediate reaction of some Chinese Weibo users was not to attack Aoi herself but the word order of her post. To this Chinese Weibo user, the order mattered as it seemed to suggest that whichever (China or Japan) is put in front was dominant. This is why a commenter pointed out such a seemingly minor issue in the first place and many commenters echoed it later, and why Aoi subsequently responded with another post of calligraphy with the sequence of the characters reversed. Three seconds later, the first anti-Japanese statement was made, "Japan belongs to China," and by the end of the first minute after the initial post, 270 comments had already responded to Aoi, including the first of many slurs: "Go away, you Japanese dog."

Aoi responded to the criticism regarding the ordering of *China* and *Japan* 18 minutes after her initial post by posting a follow-up with the sequence flipped in the calligraphy: "Chinese and Japanese citizens: friendship." This would be her only reply regarding the topic throughout the whole controversy: Unlike some microbloggers, she made no comments in her comments section and did not publicly respond to those who criticized or defended her.

Comment activity slowed after a flurry during the first hour as netizens went to sleep, but they picked up again the following day (Figure 2). Within the first 24 hours, 135,711 comments had been made to her two posts, and during the peak period of that first hour, roughly 10 comments poured in every second (see Figure 3).
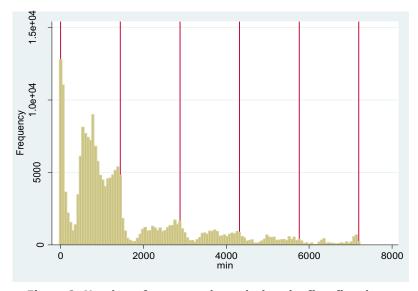
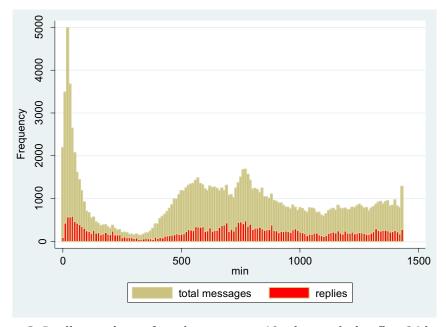*Figure 2. Number of posts per hour during the first five days.*

Figure 3. Replies as share of total posts every 10 minutes during first 24 hours.

Nationalism, Misogyny, and Slurs

A porn star, a history of foreign invasion and occupation, and a contemporary geopolitical flashpoint: Sora Aoi ignited an almost perfect storm of controversy and online verbal violence with her innocent posts. Because of Aoi's line of work, misogynist slurs directed at her were inevitable. Because of Chinese citizens' direct memory of or school education about the Japanese occupation and the misery that accompanied that period, anti-Japanese slurs are also bandied about. Finally, nationalist and patriotic rhetoric is infused throughout in response to the contemporary Diaoyu Islands dispute.

Examining just one of these strains of rhetoric is quite difficult because all three are intertwined in various discourses both outside of the comments and within in the comments themselves. Peter Gries (2004) discusses the tension between China's constructed nationalist image as a victor and the competing notion that it is a victim, particularly of Japanese aggression in the 20th century. For example, a comment that reads, "Nanjing's 300,000 people are also people in general, they are also citizens," references the estimated 300,000 Chinese citizens who died in the Japanese attack on Nanjing in 1937, a clear use of the victimization strain that Chinese citizens and the government often recall during contemporary conflicts with their former bullies.

This sense of victimization is often employed not only to link the usage of anti-Japanese slurs and nationalist rhetoric in the comments but also to connect misogynist slurs to nationalism. Nationalism is inherently intertwined with patriarchy. Women are always objectified as what men are defending, fighting for, and taking ownership of in the masculinized nationalist movement (Enloe, 2014), and the connection between masculinity and nationalism is sustained through various discursive strategies, including, for example, the construction of women as a promiscuous national "enemy" (sluts and whores; Nagel, 1998). Therefore, we cannot separate the discussion of nationalism from misogyny in these comments.

This is expressed most vividly with mentions of the comfort women, the euphemistic name Japanese soldiers gave to captured and indentured Korean and Chinese (and even some Japanese) women to serve as, essentially, sex slaves during World War II. The mentions of comfort women in those comments mainly aim at insulting Aoi herself. Particularly, in most of these mentions, she is referred to as "our comfort woman," which suggests an ownership, as if having a Japanese porn star become a sexual slave of the Chinese would be a triumph of the Chinese and an insult to the Japanese. Of course, these commenters know about the history of comfort women during wartime through formal education, but the use of the term here certainly neglects the real sufferings of those women who were forced to become sexual slaves and their lack of official apology or legal justice and therefore is not an appropriate use.

Although there are a few cases of misogynist slurs being used to feminize men, most of the misogyny is aimed at Aoi herself or at Japanese women—for example, "Let's cause a bloodbath in Tokyo! Kill all the small Japanese men, and gang rape the Japanese whores." As a porn star, Aoi is regarded as a prostitute and comfort woman, and Japanese women in general are referred to as "whores." Women of the enemy are debased as unworthy, becoming the target of militant aggression and sexual violence.

Women in the enemy nation are objectified as a commodity. The victory (the military conquering of Japan, as suggested in the previous example) of the Chinese would give them the right of consumption and ownership of Japanese women. Although Aoi has many fans in China, as a porn star, what she does for a living is not viewed as a decent job in the patriarchal social norm. Therefore, the attacks on and insults of her during such a critical moment can be justified, and her body can thus be owned and consumed by the Chinese men, no matter in what form (prostitution or watching AV). For example, "boycotting Japanese goods, boycotting Aoi Sora," and "Everyone must together boycott Japanese goods. Only then will you fucking starve. Don't forget that you are also a Japanese commodity!" The boycott of Japanese goods is directly related to the objectification of Aoi as an item to be consumed—what Chinese citizens call an *A-Pian* (a pornographic disc). Meanwhile, she is seen as someone that needs to be protected and saved, of course, by the army that consists of men, for example: "Wait until our People's Liberation Army flattens your Masturbatory Army,[6] then we'll come to save you. At that time we'll set free you Japanese and Asia will be peaceful. And America's conspiracy will be foiled."

This comment certainly addresses Aoi, and it presents a strong contrast of strength between the Chinese and Japanese armies, suggesting the latter's incompetency to protect its women and the ability of the Chinese "Liberation Army" not only to save and protect a Japanese woman but also to bring peace to the world.

Even among the positive expressions showing support of Aoi, the objectification and sense of ownership persist. For example, "The Diaoyu Islands belong to China, and Aoi Sora belongs to the world," and "Teacher Sora, you belong to the world not to Japan," suggest that the ownership of Aoi has been escalated to the level of sovereignty. "Aoi Sora belongs to the world" seems to have solved a paradox among the Chinese commenters: On one hand, Chinese national pride calls for boycotting Japanese goods (including everything that belongs to Japan); on the other hand, Aoi Sora, a Japanese porn star, is very popular among Chinese adult males. Because everybody is boycotting Japanese goods, it seems to be a moral obligation, the reconciliation of her identity as a Japanese (enemy) and a female porn star (something people can enjoy) is therefore necessary. By declaring that Aoi Sora "belongs to the world," the commenter circumvented the issue of her Japanese origin and legitimated the consumption of her body through AVs.

However, Japanese men do not escape censure in this message: The calls to rape Japanese women are a clear demasculinization of Japanese men, an attempt to portray them as unable to protect their country's women in the same way that Chinese men were unable to defend their wives', sisters', and daughters' honor during the Sino-Japanese Wars.

The conversation in the comments section illustrates a power hierarchy, a contrast of a weak, feminized Japan and a powerful, aggressive, and masculine China, parallel to the portrayal of Japanese women as sexual objects and their Chinese consumers and owners (men) in the imagined military aggression against Japan. Even though some comments show support for Aoi, this kind of support is still

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[6] A pun on the pronunciation of Japanese Self-Defense Force, *ziweidui*.

established upon present and future possession and consumption, not to mention those negative terms attacking her.

Though one would ideally read all the comments to fully grasp the types of rhetoric and the nuances in the discourse, because of the extremely large set, it was infeasible for us to do so. This is one of the major drawbacks of leaning on big data, though scholars such as Franco Moretti (2013) claim that "distant reading" is superior to more immersive approaches to large data sets of text.

Despite Moretti's (2013) persuasive all-quantitative approach to textual analysis, we decided to use a mixed-methods approach to comprehending what might be taking place in the comments: First, we built sets of keywords centered around misogynist and ethnic slurs, nationalist rhetoric, and other repeated terms that we conjectured might be noteworthy and representative of certain types of comments after reading subsets of the corpus. Table 1 presents the various slurs and terms that we generated along with the number of messages that contain each term. We categorize as negative all the terms that are slurs along with assorted others that we found to be closely connected to negative sentiment, for example *gun*, which literally means "roll" but is more generally understood to mean "go away." We then checked these terms against terms we classified as positive, which include pet names Aoi's fans use for her, such as 苍老师 (Teacher Aoi). We verified that each group was relatively distinct from the others by performing logistic regressions of all positive terms on each of the negative terms. In all cases, those messages found to contain a negative term were more than 60%—and sometimes much more than 60%—less likely to appear in a message with a positive term than one without the negative term. For example, a message with *go away* was more than 85% less likely to also contain a positive term than one without a comment containing *go away*.

Table 1. Number of Comments in Corpus Containing Certain Phrases.

Rape: 959 total comments		
adulterous rape	奸淫	76
AIDS	艾滋病	76
fuck to death	操死 / 草死 / 艹死	157
gang rape	轮奸 / 强奸	596
rape	强奸 / 强暴	458
rape and murder	奸杀	41

Misogynist slurs and phrases: 6,278 total comments		
cheap cunt	贱逼	126
comfort woman	慰安妇	613
cunt	屄	81
gouri (dog fucker)	狗日	1,660
loose woman	骚货	197

pariah dog	贱狗	29
prostitute	妓女	988
prostitution	卖淫	81
sex worker	性工作	54
slut	贱人	684
whore	婊子	2,093

Anti-Japanese sentiment: 11,828 total comments

boycott Japan	抵制日	2,202
gaoyaoqi (plastic flag)	膏药旗	2
Japanese devil	日本鬼	1,261
Japanese dog	日本狗	1,527
Japanese pirate	倭寇	292
Japan belongs to China	日本是中国	335
resist Japan	抗日	865
boycott Japan	抵制日	2,202
small Japanese	小日本	5,656
turniphead	萝卜头	58
yellow Japanese	皇军	163
ziweidui (masturbatory army)	自慰队	124

Fuck you: 4,611 total comments

cao (fuck)	艹	1,490
grasp you (fuck you)	操你	1,484
grass you (fuck you)	草你	635
tamade (fuck your mother)	他妈的	1,089

Negative words (including all of the above): 33,964 total comments

cheap	贱	3,025
Nanjing	南京	1,422
Nanjing Massacre	南京大屠杀	923
roll (go away)	滚	10,683
wicked	奸	3,259

Pro-China: 13,843 total comments

Diaoyu Islands are China's	钓鱼岛是中国	13,843

Neutral sex words: 824 total comments

make love	做爱	219
xingai (sex)	性爱	471
breasts	咪咪 / 奶子 / 巨乳	139

Positive words: 24,639 total comments

hope for good relations	希望中日友好	408
jiayou (encouragement)	加油	1,268
kind	善良	926
love you	爱你	1,223
Sister Sora	空姐	2,416
support Sora	支持苍 / 支持空	974
Teacher Sora	苍老师	19,456

Note. Totals for each category include the number of comments that contain any of the category's keywords. Because a comment can contain multiple keywords in a category, the total number shown is less than the sum of each of its keywords.

Table 2 is a pairwise correlation matrix, which shows just how tightly related certain groups of terms are with others. Not surprisingly, looking at the cross-tabulations of comments containing two different terms, most terms do not overlap with others because comments, which are restricted to 140 characters like Weibo posts, typically contain only one such term, if any. This is not only because of the character-length limitation but also because some of the pairings do not naturally correspond—a sign that the keyword sets we developed were relatively distinct from each other.

Table 2. Correlation Matrix of Phrases and Slurs (n in Parentheses).

	Negative (31,501)	Rape (878)	Misogynist (5,767)	Anti-Japanese (10,936)	Fuck You (4,164)	Roll (10,333)	Nanjing (1,342)	Neutral Sex (705)	Pro-China (12,500)
Negative (31,501)	–								
Rape (878)	–	–							
Misogynist (5,767)	–	.0306*** (93)	–						
Anti-Japanese (10,936)	–	.0380*** (162)	.0488*** (686)	–					
Fuck you (4,164)	–	.0258*** (67)	.0534*** (375)	.0439*** (512)	–				
Roll (10,333)	–	.0074*** (67)	.0966*** (1,013)	.0833*** (1,402)	.0464*** (508)	–			
Nanjing (1,342)	–	.0362*** (45)	.0265*** (111)	.0460*** (244)	.0099*** (51)	−.0001 (69)	–		
Neutral sex (705)	.0063** (138)	.0024 (5)	.0200*** (60)	−.0005 (37)	−.0033 (9)	−.0055** (22)	−.0028 (2)	–	
Pro-China (12,500)	−.0303*** (1,430)	−.0105*** (21)	−.0197*** (200)	.0022 (706)	−.0159*** (150)	−.0099*** (558)	−.0070** (56)	−.0031 (705)	–
Positive (23,665)	−.1025*** (1,306)	−.0161*** (35)	−.0428*** (218)	−.0472*** (598)	−.0365*** (155)	−.0709*** (206)	−.0164*** (72)	.0052* (103)	.0765*** (2,672)

Note. Because of Weibo's restriction of a user from posting the same comment two times in a row, some users who wanted to post the same message multiple times to the thread resorted to adding extraneous characters at the end of messages to make them different from their previous comments. To prevent these duplicate messages from overly biasing the results, we dropped all near-identical messages from the same user, or slightly more than 10,000 messages, about 5% of all comments.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

After we coded each post with dummy variables for whether it contained any of the words in Table 1, we then performed regressions to see how certain words and categories of words were correlated with each other. We would expect words that express support for Aoi (the positive words) to not show up often with words that express negative sentiment about her (e.g., ones cursing her). We can use the correlation matrix to see the intersection of any two words or sets and see the quantity of the intersection (how many messages actually contained both words or sets, which are presented in parentheses), the magnitude (the raw number), and confidence (the stars). For example, of the 10,936 posts that contain an anti-Japanese word, 598 also contain a positive word. These two are not likely to co-occur, and a regression confirms this relationship (it has a large negative magnitude and is statistically significant at *p* < .001). By contrast, *gun*, which literally means "roll" but is more often used to dismiss someone (i.e., "go away") is a negative word that appears in 10,333 posts. It co-occurs with a misogynist term in 1,013 messages, and that relationship is the opposite of that between anti-Japanese words and positive words, as shown by the large positive magnitude.

However, not all pairings of keywords showed a negative correlation in the way that *go away* did with terms of positive valence.[7] Some pairings showed a much higher than average affinity for coming together, and they are represented with the positive coefficients in Table 2. Again, not surprisingly, most of the words that we classified as negative correlate strongly with other negative words, indicating that compared with other terms, they appear together at higher rates than they do apart, whereas positive words correlate in the opposite direction. This was another sign that the keywords classified as positive were sharply different from those classified as negative—not a totally trivial accomplishment considering quantifying a user's mood from short online texts has been a topic of research in multiple fields (Bollen, Pepe, & Mao, 2009; Dodds & Danforth, 2010; O'Connor, Balasubramanyan, Routledge, & Smith, 2010).

After building sets of keywords and confirming that they did indeed represent certain sentiments, the next step would be to actually read and translate individual messages to see how certain terms are used and how they interact with other terms. It is only by performing this step that one can understand that whereas pet names such as *Teacher Aoi* are used overwhelmingly by Aoi's fans, the occasional uses of these pet names in messages with negative terms are often ironic uses that serve to insult her.

However, even though some terms do overlap, such as nationalist sentiment and misogynist slurs, the two terms do not necessarily directly interact with each other and are at times used simply to criticize both Aoi and the Japanese government, as in "Lowly cunt, the Diaoyu Islands belong to our China." However, of particular interest are instances when the two expressions do interact with each other, as illustrated in "Everyone must together boycott Japanese goods. Only then will you fucking starve. Don't forget that you are also a Japanese commodity!"

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[7] Of interest is that the pro-China phrase "The Diaoyu Islands belong to China" is also negatively correlated with most of the negative terms, indicating that most users who used this phrase were less likely to express other negative sentiments, indicating that pro-Chinese sentiment and anti-Japanese sentiment might not share as much overlap as one might think.

This comment reveals the victor rhetoric of China—the country is now so powerful that if the Chinese people successfully boycott Japanese goods, the Japanese will have no recourse because their economic might has since been dwarfed by the ascendant China. The insult here thus operates on both this nationalist economic level (China as dominant in the economic sphere) and on the gender battlefield level (Chinese citizens can now buy and throw away Japanese women as they please, a role reversal from the last century).

Discussion and Limitations

Because our data were not collected contemporaneously with the event, as we have already acknowledged, some may have been removed because of the sensitive nature of the China–Japan dispute. The Weibo administrators and the authorities may well have deleted comments deemed inappropriate or offending. It is impossible for us to detect which comments were deleted or to determine what kind of posts could be deleted, as the guideline or standard can vary in each case, and it is often up to Weibo's operations team to make such decisions. However, as we have also pointed out, the comments section of Weibo is less visible than an initial post, and comments are therefore less likely to be deleted in large numbers. We are thus still confident that the data we collected can reflect Weibo users' reactions to this incident.

Another limitation of this study is the social aspect of the comments. The incident took place in 2012, before the comments section on Weibo had a function to track to whom a particular comment was directed. Although we captured the numbers of direct comments under the posts and of comments that replied to other comments, this technological constraint did not allow us to trace the direction of the conversation.

However, because the comments section for Aoi's posts operated in some ways like a bulletin board system, we were able to identify different types of messages within the comments section that suggest the kinds of interaction users may have, using the typologies offered by the studies of Mackay and Tong (2011) and Mishne and Glance (2006). Social theorists such as Vincent Miller (2008) have argued that it is the very structure of digital communication technologies, particularly microblogs like Twitter and Weibo, that encourage this sort of "phatic communication" that "promotes generic 'announcements' over dialogue" (p. 398). Miller argues that social media is used more and more for "simple maintenance of ever expanding networks" and is "as much about interaction with others as it has about accessing information" (p. 398), a sentiment seemingly applicable to the situation here with Sora Aoi.

Certainly, those comments classified as irrelevant by Mishne and Glance's (2006) standards would fit the notion that microblogs encourage phatic communication. Indeed, the majority of the first several hundred comments to Aoi's post could be classified as ones that do not convey any information but rather simply engage others and make the commenter's presence known. Similar to American commenters racing to post "First" simply for the recognition, Chinese users rush to claim such an honor as

well. Thus, it is not surprising that, as noted previously, the first comment was simply "." and dozens of short responses followed: "Good" (*Hao*), "1," "!," and "Sofa" (*shafa*).[8]

As for the last of Mackay and Tong's (2011) categories, responses, it is somewhat difficult to differentiate those from the other three (providing information, seeking information, and irrelevant) in our corpus. In fact, all of the posts could be classified as responses, if not to other commenters directly, then to Aoi's post. However, as mentioned previously, with Weibo's semithreaded comments system, we can identify just how many commenters explicitly declared their messages to be direct responses to other comments: 67,494 of the 211,134 total comments are marked as replies, a little less than one-third of the entire set. Not surprisingly, as seen in Figure 3, a greater percentage of the total posts were addressed to fellow commenters later in the discussion than at the beginning (when a greater percentage of comments were unaddressed, and thus assumed to be directed toward Aoi). However, some commenters quote other comments without explicitly directing their messages to them. Thus, the line between response and not blurry. Often, even comments addressed to other users do not indicate a genuine desire to engage in conversation, such as the hundreds of replies to fellow commenters that contain nothing more than variations of "Fuck your mother"; these are unlikely to be real discussion starters. However, even if very few of the comments actually engage each other in the sort of serious, meaningful discussion we idealize as being possible in the nonhierarchical world of cyberspace, the way that users do respond to each other and to Aoi's initial posts are meaningful in and of themselves. As Miller (2008) acknowledges,

> One should not assume that these phatic communications are "meaningless," in fact, in many ways they are very meaningful, and imply the recognition, intimacy and sociability in which a strong sense of community is founded. Phatic messages potentially carry a lot more weight to them than the content itself suggests. However, although they may not always be "meaningless," they are almost always content-less in any substantive sense. The overall result is that in phatic media culture, content is not king, but "keeping in touch" is. More important than anything said, it is the connection to the other that becomes significant, and the exchange of words becomes superfluous. (p. 395)

And though Miller is quite convincing in his pronouncement that for most social media, the words themselves are indeed growing superfluous, we would argue that in this particular case, examining the content of the comments to Aoi's posts is worthwhile in developing a sense not just of how users keep in touch with each other and interact with a celebrity but also of the way Chinese netizens approach the topic of Chinese–Japanese relations and the types of discourse they employ.

Conclusions and Future Study

This corpus of more than 200,000 comments is a unique source of detailed information on how Chinese Internet users interact with each other online and may be of interest to those examining anti-

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[8] *Sofa* is a common early comment, signifying that the commenter is declaring her- or himself the first to reply to the original poster (commonly known as the *louzhu*, literally, "the landlord") and is thus claiming the imagined sofa.

Japanese and misogynist discourse online in China. In addition to the sorts of content analysis introduced in this article, much could also be done with the metadata that is included with each comment—data that includes characteristics about each individual user such as gender, location, the age of the account, whether the account is verified, what device is used to post to Weibo, and so on. This article presents much of the context behind the online firestorm and briefly touches on some of the ways of thinking about the kinds of rhetoric, particularly insults and slurs, that Chinese Internet users employ on Sina Weibo.

Future lines of inquiry include usage of emoji and how they fit in with the keyword sets developed. For instance, certain emoji are strongly associated with particular sentiments. Not surprisingly, those who wrote something with an anti-Japanese slur in a message were twice as likely to use an emoji expressing anger than those who did not use slurs. Conversely, those who used anti-Japanese slurs were only 10% as likely to use the "Love You" emoji.

Of course, qualitative analysis of this data set can be performed, but the plethora of individual-level data also makes this corpus capable of tying these particular anti-Japanese and misogynist statements to particular individual characteristics. Examples include spatial analysis of where particularly high concentrations of anti-Japanese users cluster (a preliminary analysis indicates that Yunan, Guizhou, and Anhui are the provinces with significantly more anti-Japanese users than other provinces, but of course, with the city-level data, we can even hone in closer on more specific areas) or analysis of other characteristics that closely relate to such behavior. Some simple regressions we have run conclude that, surprisingly, users who claimed to be female were 20% to 30% more likely than those claiming to be male to use anti-Japanese and misogynist slurs—a result that persisted even when controlling for numerous other variables.

Meanwhile, users who were verified—meaning that they had confirmed their identities with Weibo—were nearly 25% less likely than unverified users to use slurs. In particular, they were nearly 60% less likely to express some of the most hateful sentiments—for example, the keywords related to rape. Obviously, linking a one's voluntary decision to verify one's account and one's usage of slurs presents major endogeneity issues, and regressions with variables to control for gender, number of followers, and friends all reduced the magnitude and confidence of the conclusion. Even so, this data set still may hold interest to those interested in what sort of chilling effect (or in this case, moderating effect) of real-name registration (boyd, 2012)—and many other variables—may have on contentious conversations. Another stream of analysis could be the social class of Weibo users. According to a previous study about the Diaoyu Islands dispute on Weibo, the nationalism discourse on Weibo is mainly a middle-class (stratum) reaction to the current situation (Feng & Yuan, 2015). Identifying those commenters' social class would be a challenging task by merely looking at their Weibo profiles, but taking social class into consideration would certainly give us some insights into the contentious discursive formation online.

Indeed, understanding how contentious conversations unfold online is incredibly relevant not only to researchers but also to governments and technology companies. It is governments that must pass legislation to define and regulate criminal and unacceptable speech on the Internet, but companies must not only abide by those laws but must also moderate content that would reduce overall usage on their platforms. The Sora Aoi incident serves as fascinating insight into what sorts of conversation can take

place when users appear to be unencumbered by social norms or the platform's rules and proceed to respond to a prominent female figure who aims to discuss sensitive international political matters. In one way, the incredible flurry of activity in the hundreds of thousands of comments studied here is beneficial to Weibo, but in another, it can be detrimental when one considers the users—and just as importantly, the celebrity at the center of it all—who might be turned off by the violent language in the thread. Without Aoi and the presence of high-profiles users like her on the platform, Weibo would suffer in the long term, regardless of what sort of short-term burst of engagement might take place. By highlighting the factors that went into this particular incident and identifying how commenters used misogynistic and nationalist slurs, this article hopefully offers some more insight into research on contentious online conversations.

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