Withering Gongzhi:
Cyber Criticism of Chinese Public Intellectuals

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This article explores why the term *public intellectual* has turned into a disgraceful label in Chinese cyberspace. By 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 the pluralization of expression by bringing different values, beliefs, and identities into contact with unprecedented frequency and intensity. The denigration of public intellectuals illustrates the contest 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 and 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, I 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 them just laughed, but 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 homophone of *gongzhi* (public intellectuals) and *mu Zhu* (female *Zhu*) is a homophone for *muzhu* (sows), the punch line becomes "public intellectuals mate with sows."

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This thread exemplifies online expression in China in several 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 and particularly the collective deciphering and interpreting efforts reveal the subjectivity, interactivity, and playfulness that feature in 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* ("Yingxiang Zhongguo gonggong," 2004) first introduced China's top 50 "public intellectuals," members of the group were positively depicted as critical intellectuals with integrity, a sense of responsibility, and the courage to fight for citizens' freedoms and rights. Considering that the post mentioned above 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: Of the 57 users that engaged in the thread, only one was irritated and one other offered a different interpretation. 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 a perception of public intellectuals that is different from what is depicted by state or proliberal media. It shows that the Internet not only has empowered regime critics but also has 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 that has important theoretical and practical implications, but has 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 versus social resistance is limited (Damm, 2007) and that authoritarian resilience depends not only on the regime's adaptation (Nathan, 2003; Shambaugh, 2008) but also on the dynamics between its supporters and its challengers.

The article employs a three-stage strategy to trace the denigration of public intellectuals. The first stage examines the change in netizens' attitudes 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. Each stage requires a different type of data and a distinctive research method. To reveal the general trend, the article compares the usage of two specific terms that 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, which 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, long-term observation and the coding results both show that *gonggong zhishi fenzi* tends to be positive or neutral, whereas *gongzhi* is mostly negative. The results are reported in Tables 1 and 2.

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

Though the article draws on multiple sources, reliance 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 (a) 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 (b) I have 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 easier tasks. Second, NEWSMTH is a more manageable site for in-depth online ethnographic work than Weibo because of its smaller size. Third, because of its popularity and influence, Weibo 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 the 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; S. S. Wang, 2012; Q. 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, also known as 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 because 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).

        The studies cited above provide abundant insights into the state-society struggle online. But the "liberalizing Internet versus state control" framework implicit in these studies tends to downplay the richness and complexity of cyber politics in China. Evidently, the Internet has brought differing values, ideologies, and identities into contact with unprecedented frequency and intensity, not only challenging the authoritarian regime but also affecting all involved actors in multiple ways. In this sense, it is crucial to overcome the binary view of state–society dichotomy and to look into the 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 (A. X. Wu, 2014). Cyber-nationalists, while showing some proregime tendencies, have also challenged the regime's claims to nationalist legitimacy (Gries, 2005; Shen & Breslin, 2010; X. Wu, 2007). Some netizens have even started to voluntarily defend the regime against challengers whom they believe are superficial and ignorant and have bad intentions (Han, 2015a). These findings all show that the Internet is not an antiregime monolith and that 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 strengthen it, 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 proregime discourses and uncivil forces seem to have worked to the advantage of the party-state. Yet, with only a few exceptions (Han, 2015a; M. Jiang, 2016), studies have not explicitly examined such uncivil aspects of the Chinese Internet.

        Moreover, despite correctly highlighting netizens' newfound role as information producers and distributers (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 or actors as it is 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 theater 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 also, more importantly, grants audiences the power to shape a presenter's image by discussing the expressions she or he gives and gives off. Thus, consumption oftentimes is a process of interpretation and reproduction rather than passive reception. Because presenters have virtually no control over 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 its intended propaganda goals precisely because it can no longer prevent citizens from interpreting sanctioned news in different or even opposite ways than 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 proliberal media, the state, and netizens have contested the image of public intellectuals, with special focus on how ordinary netizens receive and interpret expressions that 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—that is, as scholars who tune into current affairs and try to influence sociopolitical debates or policy. Given the repressive authoritarian regime, public intellectuals in China are often characterized as individuals who dare to challenge the party-state and who advocate sociopolitical 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 although she lacks the intellectual background. But as this article shows, several actors, such as the state, proliberal 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* ("Yingxiang Zhongguo gonggong," 2004) published the first list of Chinese public intellectuals, 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" (para. 17). [2] Expressions such as "integrity," "sense of responsibility," and "with the courage to fight the entire world for truth and conscience" (paras. 6, 11) were used to describe the group. To a large extent, the report represented a boundary-pushing effort by the proliberal media: Among the 50 public intellectuals included in the report, many are longtime advocates of political reform and civil liberties such as Mao Yushi, Zhang Sizhi, and He Weifang (Goldman, 2005). According to Wang Yi (2004), a columnist and commentator who made the list, "aside from a few names to dilute the political leanings . . . the name list demonstrates a very clear pro-liberal orientation" (para. 1).

This portrayal of public intellectuals made the state nervous. The issue made its way to the November 2004 meeting of the high-profile Central Propaganda Department (CPD), which called for rebuttal and rectification of the idea (X. Jiang, 2004). Answering the call, the Shanghai-based state mouthpiece *Liberation Daily* published a commentary on November 15 claiming that the idea of "public intellectuals" is harmful 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 dangerous" because it "carries obvious ideological inclinations,

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[2] Another proliberal newspaper, the *Economic Observer,* published a collection of articles on public intellectuals in February 2003 but did not attract much public attention.

with exceeding emphasis on intellectuals as class-transcending, social-conscience bearing, and granted intervener of public affairs and watchmen for public interests" (para. 8). 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.[3] The overseas dissenting website Boxun.com (2009) also started its version of top 100 Chinese public intellectuals. Even amid popular denigration, proliberal media attempted to defend the group: In 2013, *Southern Metropolis Daily* ("Huan 'gongzhi,'" 2013) called to "do justice to public intellectuals," urging that "we should encourage people to be public intellectuals and to express with independent thoughts" (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 became popular and at the same time was dramatically denigrated (see the next section). The time lag between state criticism launched in 2004 and popular denigration of public intellectuals that gained momentum in 2011 suggests that the state's efforts were ineffective, at least initially. But by late 2011, even proliberal media such as *Southern Metropolis Daily* had to admit that "public intellectual" had become a swear word (T. 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 photoshopping" (Duan, 2012, paras. 3, 4, 6). Besides that, "little logic or cognitive ability" but some "psychological expertise" to manipulate followers is required (Duan, 2012, para. 7).

This image of public intellectuals differs from both the positive depiction by proliberal 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

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[3] The group has a Tianya blog (zhengyjingz.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 proliberal and economically left leaning.

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 last 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? Although it is impractical to prove that the 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 that attacks on the group were unlikely entirely a result of a state campaign. Second, studies suggest that state-sponsored Internet commentators (also known as the fifty-cent army) tend to focus on major social media sites and news portals such as Weibo (Han, 2015b; King et al., 2017). Because NEWSMTH, though quite popular, can hardly match Weibo's or Tianya's 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 nonpolitical ones, a pattern that is incompatible with state astroturfing. In-depth online ethnographic work also allows me to identify users who are clearly not state agents, but are 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: I 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 more than 76% of the times (Cohen's kappa = 0.7556, indicating high intercoder reliability).[4] The results are consistent over the years with increasing negativity: The portion of negative mentions from 2011 to 2014 was 67%, 83%, 84%, and 84%, respectively. I 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 judgment about whether the user has a negative, neutral, or positive view toward *gongzhi*. For instance, when one

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[4] Cohen's kappa coefficient is a robust measure of intercoder 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 60 randomly sampled mentions.

says, "I feel that Xi Dada has been brainwashed by *gongzhi*," it is coded as negative;[5] when popular blogger Han Han (2012) says he wants "to be a stinking *gongzhi*" (blog), 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 started to increase only in 2011, and those of *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. Mentions of both terms declined in 2014, but *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. Because the article intends to explore popular denigration of public intellectuals, analysis below focuses only on the usage of *gongzhi*.

Table 1. Cross-Platform Mentions of Gongzhi *and* Gonggong Zhishi Fenzi.[6]

	Gongzhi				Gonggong Zhishi Fenzi			
Year	NEWSMTH	Tianya	CNKI	*People's Daily* Group	NEWSMTH	Tianya	CNKI	*People's Daily* Group
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	23,084	6,920	72	7	1,046	406	133	11
2013	23,020	12,600	116	7	349	499	118	4
2014	12,319	10,300	94	2	290	419	93	3

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[5] Xi Dada is the cyber nickname of President Xi Jinping.

[6] 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 closely watched by the state. This is unlikely to affect inferences of the general trend and dynamics, though.

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,[7] identifying the discussion boards helps to reveal the particular online communities that are at odds with public intellectuals. Table 2 shows the top 10 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 1,000 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 (*n*)	Cumulative Percentage (%)	Intensity (mentions per 1000 posts)
1	EconForum	7,966	13.49	8.76
2	MilitaryJoke	6,874	25.13	34.09
3	Picture	5,437	34.34	6.64
4	FamilyLife	5,028	42.86	0.9
5	Fangzhouzi	4,951	51.25	26.2
6	MilitaryView	3,882	57.83	6.55
7	Olympic	1,896	61.04	7.74
8	Autoworld	1,710	63.94	0.48
9	Joke	1,381	66.28	2.82
10	Focus	1,369	68.60	7.47

The numbers show that nonpolitical 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 because of the high volume of traffic they attract; and as they generally host nonpolitical discussion, mentions of *gongzhi* on them likely indicate a truly popular grassroots momentum against the group.

Two boards, Fangzhouzi and MilitaryJoke, stand out in intensity. For every 1,000 posts on the two boards respectively, *gongzhi* was mentioned more than 26 and 34 times, much more frequently than on any other boards. The term was also mentioned more actively on these two boards: If an individual user included the term in his or her signature or nickname sections—both customizable sections appearing in every post that user puts up—it can easily boost the mentions without real discussion. For instance, on

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

EconForum and FamilyLife, more than 2,600 and 2,500 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 identity 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 proliberal 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 while he respected some of the nominees, he also felt "ashamed to be placed in the same category" (Fang, 2004, para. 13) with several other nominees. Fang's antagonism toward well-known public intellectuals such as Han Han and He Weifang has generated heated debates among netizens. Given Fang's public image as an antifraud fighter, his fights with prominent public intellectuals help project them as frauds 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 microdynamics 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 to Weibo appeared much more frequently than those to 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 more than 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. [8] In particular, the platform empowered media-savvy proliberal public intellectuals. According to the People's Daily Online Public Opinion Monitoring Center (2014), 54% of the 300 opinion leaders they identified are liberals.

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[8] 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.

The popularity of Big Vs and the denigration of public intellectuals went hand in hand. Weibo granted public intellectuals tremendous influence but also turned them into targets that are constantly watched, discussed, and challenged by 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 gain. As the public intellectual Xu Zhiyuan (2014) has acknowledged, some 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 *public intellectual*, netizens are free to construct their own perceptions, 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 provides good examples of this *gongzhi* style. 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 antiregime 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?"[9] The incident stirred debate among netizens. Many criticized He for being arrogant, as the guard did nothing wrong and followed 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!"[10] Such a depiction was clearly not what He intended to project.

The image of public intellectuals as a group deteriorated with attempts to defend He. In a Tencent Weibo tweet, Renmin University Professor Zhang Ming (2011) groused that "only in China university campuses are guarded by security guards" (tweet) because they are "*yamen.*" By likening universities to *yamen*—the mandarin's office and residence in feudal China and thus a symbol for bureaucracy and hierarchy, Zhang tried to justify He's behavior as a protest against the regime rather than a demand for privilege. Instead of saving He, Zhang turned himself into a target. On MilitaryJoke, a user posted Zhang's Weibo post 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

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[9] Zhongnanhai is where the headquarters of the state and the Party are located.

[10] One example of the signature is available at http://ar.newsmth.net/thread-b045f1bd80627c.html, retrieved May 30, 2015.

effectively set 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 antifraud crusader Fang Zhouzi accused popular writer and blogger Han Han for having his father ghostwrite for him. This dispute turned out to be a public relations fiasco for public intellectuals. Though not everyone agrees with Fang on Han being a fraud, the spectacle "cast deep skepticism on both public figures and Chinese intellectuals in general" (M. 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 although 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 to 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.

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 these public intellectuals, 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 to be 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, as a respected law professor and public intellectual, He Weifang 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 as being a member of the "road-leading party," a synonym for *traitor* (i3721pp, 2011). His image was further tainted when he criticized the Guangzhou Evergrande football team for putting the national flag on its uniforms after the team won a ticket to the FIFA Club World Cup in 2013 as an attempt to dampen the nationalist fervor. Even nonpolitical netizens saw it as an overreaction that betrayed his hostility to patriotism, as embroidering uniforms with the national flag is a common practice (NBAthlon, 2013). To ridicule him, netizens

juxtaposed his microblog entry and uniforms of other world-famous clubs that bear 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 whom they perceive as national enemies.[11]
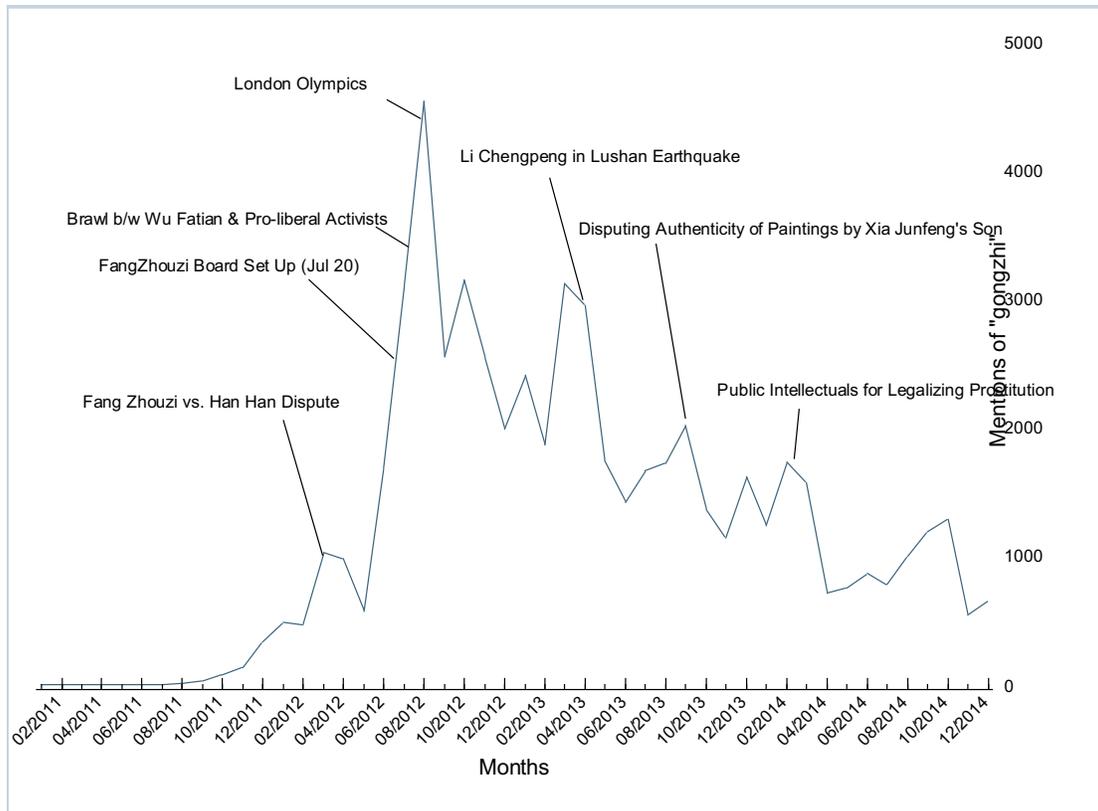

Figure 1. Selected events and discussion on public intellectuals (NEWSMTH).

Popular nationalism is not the only normative realm where the two sides do not see eye to eye. Netizens and public intellectuals perceive many sociopolitical 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 amid public anger toward Yao Jiaxin, who stabbed a woman to death after hitting her in a traffic accident, they ignited the fury of many netizens.

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[11] The channel has been renamed from "Public Intellectual Observation" to "Weibo Observation." See http://bbs.m4.cn/forum-1396-1.html.

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 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 woman dead through the window! The car is still on No. 75 Freeway! (Qi Tong–Xuanwuyan xinmeiti, 2013)

The incident actually happened in Texas, U.S. 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 more than 17,600 comments within three months. On Tianya.cn, a single thread on the topic attracted more than 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 in other aspects. As the above cited "Homemade 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

By 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 antirumor 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 to denigrate public intellectuals. However, the wording of a 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, para. 1).

Compared with the state's efforts, netizen-driven denigration of public intellectuals displays distinctive features. Unlike the struggle between the state and proliberal 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 projecting an image of public intellectuals as ignorant and incompetent but also differentiating 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 proliberal 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 has: 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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